

volume one
SUMMER 1980

COMEDY

number one
THREE DOLLARS

THE **COMEDY** INTERVIEW: Sid Caesar

Vic and Sade--so Normal it's Funny

HELP! magazine: Editor invents the future

the season's **SIT-COMS**: just the facts

Keaton lives: Believing in **BUSTER**



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YOU ASKED FOR IT!

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More people see more comedy on television than in



EDITORIAL

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About the greats of the past before they're forgotten
About tomorrow's greats before they're household words
About the best of comedy, pure and simple, whatever the style,
whatever the medium.*



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the art and craft of humor

PUBLISHER

Martha Thomases

EDITOR

John Robert Tebbel

**DESIGN &
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MARKETING CONSULTANT

Charles E. A. Muldaur

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Dom Cerulli
Mark Jacobson
Leonard Maltin
Legs McNeil
Dennis O'Neil

WEST COAST EDITOR

David Reiss

CONTRIBUTING ARTISTS

Larry Kazal
Ellen Burnie
Christine Rodin
Scott Berkson
John Holmstrom
Maggie Saliske
Amy Lipton
Ludvik Tomazic

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CONTRIBUTORS

• Mark Evanier and Jim Brochu work in Hollywood. Evanier writes for stand-ups and TV (*Kotter*, *Loveboat*, *Pink Lady*). Brochu is best known as a legit actor.

• Irving Falk, an Emmy winner, is a professor of Radio and Television at New York University. He's written for Eddie Cantor and is one of the few mortals to have plowed through the thousands of *Vic and Sade* scripts at the Wisconsin State Historical Society.

• Larry Hama is the editor of *Crazy*, the Marvel humor magazine, home of "Kasper—The Dead Baby." An avid marksman and accomplished actor, he had the honor of making Larry Linville prisoner-of-war on a *M*A*S*H* episode. One current project is a transformation of *Benny Hill* into a magazine.

• Mark Jacobson wrote the New York magazine story which inspired the hit television series, *Taxi*. He's also done scripts for that show, articles for *Esquire* and *Rolling Stone*, and is at work on a novel.

• Leonard Maltin entered publishing at a tender age as the founder of *Film Fan Monthly*. His many books on the movies include *The Disney Films* and the forthcoming history of American animation, *Of Mice and Magic* (Plume). He also was the curator of the unfortunately short-lived American Academy of Humor.

• Dennis O'Neil has won awards for his work as a writer and editor of comics (currently *Spiderman*). He's written for television, radio, has authored five books

and has contributed to *Oui*, *Penthouse*, *High Times* and the *Village Voice*.

• Steve Simels is the popular columnist for *Stereo Review*, president of the 13th Street chapter of the Keith Richards Fan Club and hopes to be Miss Subways someday.

• John Robert Tebbel is the editor of this magazine and gets to say whatever he wants.

• Alison Wickwire was known to many as Ruby Monday, the gossip columnist for Warner Brothers Records' propaganda publications. She currently covers the real world for several New Jersey newspapers.



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Why Woody Allen Makes Films in New York City



Woody Allen and Diane Keaton on Sutton Place bench in "Manhattan."

"I like to make films in New York because I live in New York and all my friends are here and I like to eat and sleep in my own home."

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STANDING UP

"Like Someone Robbed My Brain"

By Mark Jacobson

In the clubs they say stand-up comics arrive in waves. These are not the well-groomed waves on which French directors, ascots flowing from their necks, surf the Seine. These are crummy, bottle-dotted, puke green swells off Coney Island, but they are waves nevertheless. I thought I'd catch the new one because I like watching stand-up comics sweat. I can watch them kill and bomb for hours. To me they're like horror movies, I don't care how bad they are, I enjoy the form.

Last time around at the Improv (isatone and really the only place. Comics relate to the heritage of the Times Square joint, and it's the only place with bookers out front) the wave included Elayne Boosler, Andy Kaufman, Richard Lewis, Richard Belzer, Jay Leno, and Ed Bluestone. Not quite the storm that deposited Rodney, Buddy Hackett, Joe Amis, and Lenay Bruce at the counter of Hanson's, but there was some slick talent there. Kaufman has the lock on the trend towards an est-oriented non-verbal culture, Lewis has some nice hunks, and Elayne has her moments. Bluestone was certainly the best, from a ha-ha point of view. His "if-an-enemy-of-yours-dies-the-funeral-is-your-last-chance-to-get-even" routine was classic and he had the best advice for substantial investment: pipe in muzak to miners trapped underground.

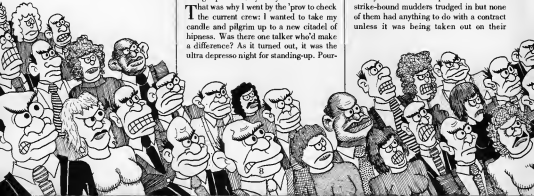
Bluestone left the N.Y. comic club scene for Hollywood, where, like all of his contemporaries, he had an overwhelming obsession to make it. He did, slightly. There were many Griffins, Douglasases, and Carsons—the comic's holy trinity with extra on the Carson—and a slot on the short-lived reprise of *Laugh-In*. But Blue never broke giant, never got the celebrity he craved or his talent deserved. There are any number of reasons why Bluestone remains unknown: too Jewish, too sick, too ugly (big bag eyes, looks like Walter B. Cooke in a tux), too much talk (old-line stand-ups are passe, these days you've got to be "visual" and have other props besides violins, like Kaufman and Steve Martin). But mostly it is agreed that Bluestone has far too weird a mind. After all, this is a man who once claimed that while other kids pictured themselves as Mickey Mantle, he wanted to be a Supreme Court judge so he could go around with a mallet screaming "GUILTY" as he crushed insects. Not that this type of schtick doesn't play on Carson, it's just that it doesn't *kill* on Carson and what doesn't kill doesn't get asked back regularly. Blue was betrayed by the same intelligence and desire to "be hip" that got him over in the first place. A dozen years after the beatnik-hipster wave, being hip could only carry a comic so far.

That was why I went by the 'prov to check the current crew: I wanted to take my candle and pilgrim up to a new citadel of hipness. Was there one talker who'd make a difference? As it turned out, it was the ultra depresso night for standing-up. Pour-

ing like Arkville. The City was flooded, a real bitch for the blown out umbrella set who were hooding it due to the massive transit strike which shut down the subways and clogged everything with honking cars. A few jigsaw pieces of an oil painting (not enough for the Last Supper) had straggled into the club. True toilet-town.

But it could have been a perfect night. It could have been perfect if a big agent-producer, unable to find a cab outside of Sardi's rushed into the Improv to escape the rain. He would fold his swank trenchcoat, and gruffly order a drink. "This is the end," he'd tell his clutchy girlfriend, "this is the end of the line. It must be what hell is like, spending time in an empty club listening to a couple of hopeless cases trying to be funny." But wait a minute. From the showroom the producer picks up a snippet of a zinger that makes him laugh. He perks up his pointy ears, the ones with cash register drums. Something else is funny. More—all hysterical. Lines, lines, lines, a cascade of great lines. Stories, too. And they're important stories. This skinny Jew is writing a brilliant novel disguised as stand-up. The agent-producer moves to a ringside table. After the set there are handshakes, then a meeting, a contract, and the rest is comedy and—as with Chaplin and Bruce—world history.

Of course nothing like that happened on my visit to the Improv. A few more strike-bound mudders trudged in but none of them had anything to do with a contract unless it was being taken out on their



heads. The comedy wasn't so inspiring either. This wave looked limp. It was as if five more years of the 70s had worn these suckers down. Much of the material was the regular rubbish: Jew stuff (although this rap is notably decreasing due to its general inappropriateness for middle American TV audiences), comparisons of ethnic groups utilizing the usual stereo-

types, wow-I'm-stoned leftover drug jokes, obligatory digs at Presidential politics, some woe-is-wimpy-me sex complaining (but there are never any really dirty comics at places like the Improv. These are people trying to crack show biz, not a frumpy cat looking to make the dark side of the moon blush at a party), the typical *Saturday Night Live* lowest common denominator TV parody, 50s posture jokes, and roaches. NY comics always have roach jokes. The roaches are always big enough for Dale Evans to saddle, and kick ass. I support roaches are subtext code for blacks and Puerto Ricans. Whatever, they are useful to an Improv comic. You can always incorporate your bag jokes into your "New York dirt-tough-crazy vs. California health-air-head" routine. The rap is a fixture of the routines of most stand-ups who split for the Coast and work the Melrose Avenue version of the Improv. Much of this sameness is no doubt brought on by the belief most comics have that on the TV-Vegas circuit only certain stuff goes. Just as the old-timers fought to have a Catskills act. Kind of depressing if you're hoping to find someone writing his comic novel disguised as stand-up. Once, after having heard the

FUNNY THING ABOUT LOST WAGES NEVADA, FOLKS! HEHEH!...UH...HEY! I MUST BE IN HEAVEN, RIGHT? YOU'RE SUCH A DEAD AUDIENCE! GET IT? HEHEH! DEAD?...UH

NOK! NOK! NOK!

same 50s jokes all night, it caused a woman to exclaim, "They all have the same act. It's a plot."

Not that there wasn't anyone to make me laugh. John Mendoza said a Puerto Rican coffin was 16 shopping bags, 15 for the body, one for the radio. And Jimmy Charles was some yocks. I liked Marc Senter best. A nervous, tubby, face-

peeling Jew, Senter has what they call concepts. He said his apartment was drab, so he tried to spruce it up by taking a sheet of Silly Putty to the Metropolitan Museum. He spread the stuff over the painting and got an imprint. He didn't like the lips on a Monet, so he stretched them. After that Senter said he wanted to be a police decoy but he couldn't fit into the duck suit. Then he said he could tell the laundromat near him was gradually turning into a Mexican restaurant. He could tell by the sign saying, "Don't drink the rinse water." Senter was funny.

When he didn't get over he covered with the "bomb" line. "Well, that's another one you won't be hearing on the *Tonight Show*." Senter, a sweet, self-effacing type who seems amazed when someone tells him they actually thought he was funny, claims he uses that line a lot. But on this night, he asked, "Well, to tell the truth, you probably won't be hearing any of these on the *Tonight Show*. If they haven't asked me by now, I guess they never will." He said this with a sigh of recognition. But he didn't sound bitter.

In this, I felt, I detected a real difference between this and the last wave of Improv comics. Like Bluestone, his favorite and clear predecessor, Senter is almost certainly non-star material. (He isn't even as good-looking as Blue.) But Bluestone

Continued on page 55

YOU'RE THE ONE WHO'S DEAD CAUSE YOU STINK!

△ HOLMSTROM '80

Who's on First?

Abbott and Costello's most famous routine,

Who's on First?,

has its roots in many burlesque turns dating from the turn of the century. Bud and Lou performed it countless times on the stage, on radio and in the movies,

making it their own. This version is a transcription from their own radio show, broadcast on June 18, 1944.



Lou: Look, Abbott, if you're the coach, you must know all the players.
 Bud: I certainly do.
 Lou: Well, you know, I never met the guys, so you'll have to tell me their names and then I'll know who's playing on the team.
 Bud: Oh, I'll tell you their names. But, you know, strange as it may seem, they give these ball-players nowadays very peculiar names.
 Lou: You mean funny names?
 Bud: Strange names, pet names like Dizzy Dean.
 Lou: And his brother Daffy.
 Bud: Daffy Dean—
 Lou: And their French cousin.
 Bud: French?
 Lou: Goofé.
 Bud: Goofé Denna. Oh, I see. Well, let's see, we have on the bags, we have Who's on first, What's on second, I Don't Know is on third.
 Lou: That's what I want to find out.
 Bud: I say, Who's on first, What's on second, I Don't Know's on third.
 Lou: Are you the manager?
 Bud: Yes.
 Lou: You're gonna be the coach, too?
 Bud: Yes.
 Lou: Do you know the fella's names?
 Bud: Well, I should.
 Lou: Well, then who's on first?
 Bud: Yes.
 Lou: I mean the fella's name.
 Bud: Who.
 Lou: The guy on first.



Bud: Who?
 Lou: The first baseman.
 Bud: WHO!
 Lou: The guy playing first.
 Bud: Who is on first.
 Lou: I'm asking you who's on first.
 Bud: That's the man's name.
 Lou: That's whose name?
 Bud: Yes.
 Lou: Well, go ahead and tell me.
 Bud: That's it.
 Lou: That's who?
 Bud: Yes!
 Lou: Look, you got a first baseman?
 Bud: Certainly.
 Lou: Who's playing first?
 Bud: That's right.
 Lou: When you pay off the first baseman every month, who gets the money?
 Bud: Every dollar of it.
 Lou: All I'm trying to find out is the fella's name on first base.
 Bud: Who.





Low: The guy that gets the money.
 Bud: That's it.
 Low: Who gets the money?
 Bud: He does, every dollar. Sometimes his wife comes down and collects it.
 Low: Whose wife?
 Bud: Yes. What's wrong with that?
 Low: Look, all I wanna know is, when you sign up the first baseman, how does he sign his name to the contract?
 Bud: Who.
 Low: The guy.
 Bud: Who.
 Low: How does he sign his name?



Bud: That's how he signs it.
 Low: Who?
 Bud: Yes.
 Low: All I'm trying to find out is what's the guy's name on first base?
 Bud: No, What is on second base.
 Low: I'm not asking you who's on second.
 Bud: Who's on first.
 Low: One base at a time!
 Bud: Well, don't change the players around.
 Low: I'm not changing nobody.
 Bud: Take it easy, buddy.
 Low: I'm only asking you, who's the guy on first base?
 Bud: That's right.
 Low: Okay.
 Bud: All right.
 Low: I mean, what's the guy's name on first base.
 Bud: No, What is on second.
 Low: I'm not asking you who's on second.
 Bud: Who's on first.
 Low: I don't know.
 Bud: Oh, he's on third. We're not talking about him. Now let's get—
 Low: Now how did I get on third base?
 Bud: Why, you mentioned his name.
 Low: If I mentioned the third baseman's name, who did I say was playing third?
 Bud: No, Who's playing first.
 Low: What's on first?
 Bud: What's on second.
 Low: I don't know.



Bud: He's on third.
 Low: There I go, back on third again.
 Bud: I can't help it.
 Low: Now, will you stay on third base? And don't go off it.
 Bud: All right, now what do you want to know?
 Low: Now, who's playing third base?
 Bud: Why do you insist on putting Who on third base?
 Low: What am I putting on third?
 Bud: No, What is on second.
 Low: You don't want who on second?
 Bud: Who is on first.
 Low: I don't know!
 Both: Third base!
 Low: Look, you got outfield?
 Bud: Sure.
 Low: The left fielder's name?
 Bud: Why.
 Low: I just thought I'd ask you.
 Bud: Well, I just thought I'd tell you.
 Low: Then tell me who's playing left field.
 Bud: Who is playing first.
 Low: I'm not—Stay out of the infield!
 I wanna know what's the guy's name in left field.
 Bud: No, What is on second.
 Low: I'm not asking you who's on second.
 Bud: Who's on first.
 Low: I don't know.
 Both: Third base!
 Low: And the left fielder's name?
 Bud: Why!
 Low: Because.
 Bud: Oh, he's center field.
 Low: Bey-eeh-ehh

Continued on page 62



T H E COMEDY INTERVIEW

BY MARK EVANIER AND JIM BROCHU

SID CAESAR

Earlier this year, NBC ably demonstrated the kind of thinking that has put them in third place and kept them there. They launched two new variety shows, despite the fact that the genre looks to be going the way of the passenger pigeon. One of these was called *Pink Lady and Jeff* and, if you never caught it, that gives you much in common with umpteen Nielsen households. We watched it regularly but, then, we were two of its writers so we would. It was an alternately maddening and thrilling experience. The maddening parts had to do with network hassles, time restrictions, budget problems, standards-and-practices brouhahas and the like. Most of the thrilling moments had to do with our semi-regular Special Guest Star, Sid Caesar.

And if you don't know who he is, what are you doing with this magazine?

Sid Caesar was as much a part of early television as the orihicon tube. Steve Allen called him the "Chaplin of the Airwaves," a handle to which he still blushes a mite. And while it's true that much of 50s television does not stand the

test of time, the Caesar shows do. The surviving kinescopes, most notably those assembled into a theatrical compilation entitled *Ten From Your Show of Shows* prove this: They really are as good as everyone remembers.

Caesar started on TV in 1949 with *The Admiral Broadway Revue*, wherein he was first teamed with his most popular distaff co-star, Imogene Coca. Early in 1950, Caesar and Coca, joined by Howard Morris and Carl Reiner, among others, starred in the legendary *Your Show of Shows*, a 90-minute live concoction of brilliant comedy sketches with occasional musical respites. The show was produced by Max Liebman and was three-fifths of an NBC show called *The Saturday Night Revue*. The remaining two-fifths emanated from Chicago and was hosted by Jack Carter. Virtually no one—except maybe Jack Carter—remembers this Chicago hour today. But the Sid Caesar contribution remains legendary.

Your Show of Shows lasted until 1954 when Caesar and Coca went their

own separate ways—she to a shortlived situation comedy, he to the hour-long *Caesar's Hour*, along with Reiner, Morris and Nanette Fabray. That show yielded nearly another three years of the special brand of comedy, so often emulated, that is Sid Caesar's alone. Any show that must produce so much material will occasionally have its clunkers—but Caesar's shows boasted remarkably high batting averages, owing mainly to superior acting and writing. The names of the writers on the Caesar programs are oft-recounted as an example of genuine heavyweights. And the heaviest of all may well have been Caesar himself who was deeply involved with the writing and staging. When we got our chance to work with him, we were impressed with how diligent he was and with his refusal to "settle" (his term) for an idea that was merely good. The three of us all felt a certain amount of frustration regarding the handicaps under which we had to work and some of that shows in the interview that follows.

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Illustration: Scott Barkson

'Some writers today, when they hear the laughs coming out of the machine, start believing that the stuff is actually funny.'



Caesar starred in several other programs following *Caesar's Hour* and in many movies, as well, and Broadway shows. He remains very active, alert and almost appallingly physically fit, despite a reputation so overwhelming, it would crush anyone who tried to coast on it. All through the tapings of *Pink Lady*—and of the other NBC variety show, *The Big Show*, on which Caesar was also a semi-regular, people crowded into the stages, just to see him in person, perhaps to meet him—but, most of all, to laugh at nearly every move and every sound. He really is a very funny man.

In the weeks we worked with him, we didn't get enough—so we were glad to use this interview as an excuse to visit again with the man. At his home in the plush Trousdale area of Los Angeles, we sat with tape recorders running as Caesar (sometimes rumored as a bad interview) delivered a hysterical commentary on life, death and all things comedic. There were constant interruptions throughout, mainly from a maid who seemed determined to find the absolute noisiest way to put away an endless supply of just-washed dishes. To each intrusion on his thought process, Caesar reacted—well, a lot like he'd react if it were a sketch and Imogene Coca were rattling them pots and pans. Caesar had told us in one of our first writing sessions that everything he did was drawn from life. Until we visited his home, we didn't know how true that was.

Are you ready for the first question?

Yessir, I am ready for the first question.

Good. Who was the eighteenth President of the United States?

That was a dual leadership period, you know, that was James K. Polk and his sister Ann.

Shall we start by talking about

what's wrong with television today or do you want to save that for later?

That's easy. The networks. There are too many people trying to make what should be very few decisions. The depth of the shows that they're putting on is unimaginable. The depths that they go to to get nothing. It's like drilling a dry hole and saying, "What a bonanza! Look at that hot air coming out!"

Do you think the writing on Show of Shows was superior to TV writing today?

Everything's relative. It depends on your point of view. But you see these guys from the networks.

(Caesar suddenly turns into a cigar-smoking executive) "I've got an idea. We'll do this and we'll do that. Huh? What do you mean somebody did that before? We'll do it better, we'll do it harder, faster, bigger."

(Sid's husky dog, Sasha, wanders in.)

You want to talk, Sasha? *(The dog turns and walks out of the room.)* She only talks to dog magazines. Sorry, guys.

One could suggest that the writing on your show was better because there was no laugh machine. You really had to depend on the material to get the big yoks.

Right, no sweetening. You did it live. Sitcom laughter today is phony. And

the sad part is that everyone accepts it. Another sad part is that some writers today, when they hear the laughs coming out of the machine, they start believing that the stuff is actually funny. They kid themselves. There are people laughing in the audience of *Happy Days* who died in 1954. Dead people are laughing. This is not the first time all this has been said—but laugh tracks are abused.

Sounds like a sweetening session would be a great idea for a sketch.

(Turning into a man with a laugh machine.) "Yeah, I'll tell you what. There isn't much to this scene at all. Wait a minute—he opens the door here. That's good. We'll put in a laugh for opening the door. How about some applause, too? Yeah, that's it. A laugh—then applause—and then a yok. And I tell you what—let's put in a guffaw. No, skip the guffaw and throw in a couple of chorles. Then, when he closes the door, another guffaw and then a standing ovation."

(As himself) All that and the scene didn't even start yet!

What were your relations like with the network people? Did they interfere or were you left pretty much alone?

Network people are dumb. Generally, they're dumb. Definitely. There were a few guys who knew—guys like Pat Weaver at NBC or Hubbel Robinson at CBS. They knew, they had vision. They knew what an audience wanted and they tried to give it to them. They brought some class and they didn't go around saying, "What are the numbers, what are the numbers?"

You see, the network people have to justify their existences. They have the ability to ruin good material and they certainly are consistent in that aspect of their existence.

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I can see the president of a network at a meeting.

(Into character) "Look, fellas—this show is doing great. It's number one. So I tell you what we'll do. Let's change the night and the hour and we'll let the viewers hunt for it. Then we'll see if it's really good. What do you mean, we got a ninety-four share? Let's change the show and change the people and the time and the place and the characters and then we'll see if it's really good. That's the real test."

How long have you been with the network, sir?

"I've been here three days and I haven't fired anybody. I've got to get busy."

People say you're unique. What is it that you think makes you unique?

It's not a uniqueness, really. I do what I feel. A lot of times in the last few years, I've been feeling I was wrong. Maybe this "new comedy" is different.

What do you mean by, "new comedy?"

Well, I didn't know what it was. Now, I've found out it's full of baloney. It's what they call "dumb" comedy. When you come out with a balloon in your nose and an arrow through your head. That, to me, makes no sense. It relates to nothing. It's like a bad cartoon and life is not a cartoon.

Do you think the success of some of those comedians has to do with a gap in today's entertainment?

I would say so. People laugh because they've been brought up on bad television. They've been brought up on laugh machines. They don't know what's funny. They think a balloon in the nose is funny.

Who makes you laugh? Who influenced your comedy?

Chaplin. W.C. Fields. Buster Keaton. Laurel and Hardy.

One guy I thought was terrific was Harry Ritz. He walked funny. I mean, Chaplin walked funny and they all had funny walks—but Ritz talked a lot with his body, which is quite important.

Do you like Monty Python?

Very much. They're very bright. They have good ideas—a little far out, sometimes—but they commit to the material and then they perform the shit out of it. Whether it's good or bad, at least they follow through.

They don't really take from life, though. They have a lot of balloons up the nose—or tape recorders.

That's true. When you go out looking for the Holy Grail, that's not life.

Do you get frustrated watching television comedy today?

Many times. There are a lot of times on *Saturday Night Live* where they have great ideas but they don't follow them through. Okay, you can't always find a punch line and so you have to settle. But at least you can tell your audience what you're doing. Perform it, don't talk about it.

'Sets cannot be built too small. The smaller it is, the funnier it is. I don't know why.'



You started out as a saxophone player. How did you get from the saxophone to comedy?

When I went to the mountains, I played in a five-piece band. They had a social staff at the time and I would help out, once in a while, in a sketch. Then they wanted me all the time and that's when I said, "Wait a minute. I'm making ten dollars a week and if I'm going to be in sketches all the time, I should get twelve dollars a week. Two dollars a week to be a comedian."

They said, "We can't afford the two dollars a week so you don't have to play saxophone at lunch. How's that?"

And I said, "That's fine." And that was it.

Were you really a doorman at the Capitol Theatre?

Sure. First, I was an usher. Then I was promoted to doorman, 'cause it got to be winter and the guy who was doorman quit and I was the only one who fit the uniform.

Were you a funny doorman?

No. It was very high class. You weren't allowed to speak or say anything. A lot of people would come up to me and ask, "Do I have time for a sandwich before the picture starts?"

And I'd say, "What kind of sandwich are you going to have? You can have a chopped liver sandwich but if you have corned beef, you're gonna miss the short subject."

Tell us about Max Liebman. He put the show together—

Max is the one who had experience putting on shows. I had experience but not in his league. Max was the guy who had the guts to do it. I was the one who was dumb enough to do it. I remember, we went to a lunch meeting once—Max, myself, Pat Weaver, some of the other guys from the network. We were sitting, looking at the menu and, finally, one of

'People think, that out of four-and-a-half-billion people, they're the only one who does anything stupid.'

Caesar, Allen



the network guys says, "What do you want? You want a half-hour, an hour or an hour-and-a-half?"

I looked at the menu. I thought, "An hour-and-a-half? Who wants to wait an hour-and-a-half to get something to eat? I'm hungry. Must be an important restaurant but an hour-and-a-half is too long to wait for lunch."

The network guy said, "The show. How long a show do you want to do?"

I looked at Max and, in my naive way, I said, "If we're going to go, let's go all the way." So we took an hour-and-a-half. We had no idea how we were going to get material to fill the time. We just took it on out of sheer ignorant bliss.

Tell us how Mel Brooks got involved with the show.

I was doing a show called *Make Mine Manhattan* and Mel used to drop around. He'd come see me in my dressing room and we used to kid around a lot.

You told me that David Burns gave you a piece of advice on the opening night of Make Mine Manhattan.

Yeah. He said, "Don't let me upstage you. Don't let me get in back of you. If I talk loud, you talk louder." That was very nice. It was good advice.

On Your Show of Shows, what were the creative sessions like?

We had the writing room and I would come in with an idea or they would come in with an idea. It never happened the same way twice. We were all in one room together and there were some incredible writers on that show. We had Mel Tolkin, Lucille Kallen, Mel Brooks, Larry Gelbart, Neil Simon, Danny Simon, Michael Stewart, Woody Allen.

One person would type—Mike Stewart, who went on to write *Bye Bye Birdie* and *Hello, Dolly*. He was fantastic on the typewriter. As fast as we could say it, he could put it down. He had a great memory. We finished a sketch one night

and it was accidentally thrown away. Mike came in in the morning, sat down and retyped the whole thing from memory.

You must take a certain pride that everyone associated with the show has done so well.

Sure, I'm happy. But I'll be honest. There's some jealousy there, too.

Did anyone surprise you by the road they took?

Not really, no. Some of the things they did surprised me.

If someone had said to you then that Larry Gelbart was going to be a very big, very popular writer—

I could see that, sure. Doc Simon didn't surprise me in the least. He writes well because he writes what he knows about. Except when he did the Chekhov thing.

I met him once after the try-out performance of one of his plays and he asked me what I thought of it. I gave him a few minor criticisms and he said, "You're absolutely right. I'm not going to change it but you're absolutely right."

When you've got a few million dollars, you can say that.

Was Carl Reiner hired as a writer who became an actor or as an actor who became a writer?

He was hired as an actor. He was doing a show called *Call Me Mister* and we needed a guy. In fact, we needed a tall guy 'cause Max Liebman insisted that the straight man had to be taller than the comedian. Carl is very bright. He's got a great sense of humor but he goes overboard sometimes. But he's done some excellent things.

Why do you think he's gravitated more towards writing and directing than performing?

Well, that was his strongest area. He could never make it as a number one comedian but he did great as a writer and

director. There are certain people who are number one comedians and certain people who are number two comedians. And it has nothing to do with ego—just the way your talents develop.

Would Nancy Walker and Harvey Korman be examples of that?

Yes. Great number two comedians.

Let's talk about Howie Morris.

There's probably no interesting story about how he joined you, right? You just needed somebody short.

That's right. He was in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and they told him that Sid

Caesar in Tars and Spars



SID CAESAR

Caesar needed someone to pick up and throw around. Howie's a very good performer.

I still have the image of him scrapped around your leg in your take-off of This Is Your Life.

You know that that happened as it happened? That was not rehearsed. That shows you what years of being with each other and working together and anticipating each other can do. We all anticipated each other. If we saw something was going to happen, we'd just let it happen. And if it didn't work out, we'd pick it up.



Who have you worked with in years since with whom you've had that kind of rapport? Anyone?

Very few people. I started to have rapport with some people but it was never given room to breathe and grow. The networks are too scared to let anything live for a while. You can't get writers and performers together and expect them to hit a stride in five or six weeks. It can't be done. They have to know each other. Then you can find out strengths and weaknesses.

Now, when you were doing the shows on Saturdays, how far ahead would you plan things?

Monday morning. We did it a week at a time. If we got an idea, we put it on its feet right away—without Coca, without Carl if he wasn't there. We'd see if it worked. Even then, there'd be rewrites and changes. In the long run, you can never tell until you put it in front of an audience. That's the final proof.

Were there changes right up until air time or was the show frozen before that?

Well, we'd try to freeze the show by Thursday night or Friday morning. Friday afternoon, we'd have the first technical run-through because we were only in the theatre one day. That was it. Then we shot the show as it went out. You know, a lot of people come up to me and say, "How long did it take you to shoot an hour-and-a-half show?"

And I say, "An hour-and-a-half."

Then they say, "No, you don't understand. How long did it physically take you to shoot it?"

And I say, "An hour-and-a-half!" And they still wouldn't understand so, finally, I'd say, "Let me put it this way. It was one take for an hour-and-a-half."

That they understand. But they're always aghast.

How did you gauge the time?

We had to do it by each half-hour.

Most of the time, it was a matter of going long and having to cut. But, sometimes, we were short, too.

Were any sketches ever scrapped after dress rehearsal?

No. By then, we had to make the best of what we had.

Were there a lot of ad-libs or break-ups?

We'd ad-lib once in a while. Not big things. It was rare. We never broke up. Never. Didn't allow it. It was like a "no smoking" rule—"No laughing on stage." I think it's phony to break up at your own jokes. Unless it's your style.

Did you ever use cue cards?

No. Never used them. How can you read cards and perform at the same time? There's no way. You can't do it because you lose all eye contact with the people you're working with. And if there's no eye contact, there's nothing.

Are you a quick study?

No. I have to work to memorize. But the work is worth it for the security you get during a performance when you know exactly what you're doing.

How many cameras were used on Your Show of Shows?

Five.

I ask because, nowadays, there's a great tendency to strip the actor of spontaneity by forcing them to hit very rigid marks.

I know. It's terrible. Sure, we had to hit marks but if we were off, the cameras would adjust, not the other way around. You lose sight of who you're performing for, the audience or the cameras.

Cameramen—in fact, most of the technical people—seem to take less of an interest in what they're doing. Our cameraman was a definite part of the family. He was important and he used to go out of his way to get good shots. I once complimented a sound man on a sound effect when I was doing a film. And, all of

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a sudden, he took more interest. He went out of his way to do good because he knew that what he was doing was going to be appreciated.

Do you think a lot of comedy is lost because of technical considerations?

It's like I said before—if you depend on a laugh track, you're in trouble, right away. Forget it. All the laugh tracks in the world aren't going to make something funny.

The script then is the blueprint?

It starts there. Everything starts with the writing.

I notice you pay incredible attention to detail.

It's difficult to pay attention to detail when it's not your show. Sometimes, for instance, you have to take careful consideration of the physical size of the set. Sets cannot be built too small. The smaller it is, the funnier it is.

Why?

I don't know why. I once did a show where we tried to make a Thanksgiving dinner in a kitchen that was the size of one lane of a bowling alley and had sinks and stoves and washing machines and that was funny. So you pay attention to everything.

We just watched some of your old shows and I was amazed to see that all the sets were paintings. If it was a living room set, tables and chairs were all painted on.

Of course—and it still worked. People watch what's happening in front of the set. Nobody stays home and watches a show because they have great sets. See, that's the thinking of some of these idiots at the network. They get so involved in the "look" of a show that they forget the content.

It's like with *The Big Show*. They try and do a special every week. But you can't do a special every week. You can do an ordinary but not a special.

Do you think the network knows

that?

Networks don't know. They have to be told. They're dumb. They think that because a guy walks out with a balloon up his ass and an arrow through his head, that that's it. You can fool some of the people some of the time—that's it.

Nick Vanoff, who produced *The Big Show*, knows. He used to be a dancer on *Your Show of Shows* and you can talk to him. The only reason TV shows are watched is to see the people. They don't tune in to see the sets or the costumes. You have to like the people first. Then you laugh.

On a show we did one time, the producers wanted to order the sets—

Before you wrote the script, right? Right.

Sure. They don't know at the networks and they must be told, not in a polite manner but very strongly and very forcefully. "You're dumb!" First, you write a show with words and ideas. That's first, always. The rest comes later. But they don't know that. They do it ass-backwards.

You spend a lot of time with writers on the shows you do.

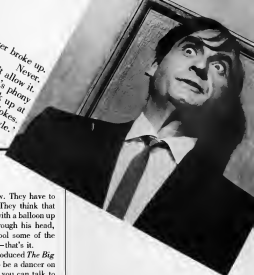
Sure. And I directed, too. A lot of people don't know that I've produced and directed and been a fountain pen and a doorknob and everything. But I never took credit.

Were there ever times on Your Show of Shows when one of the writers swore something was funny—and you did it but it died?

Sure. Everything we did wasn't that great. I'd say 75 percent of the stuff is still good today. The rest is not so good.

Mel Brooks wrote a joke once that I had doubts about. He said, "Sid, this is sure-fire. I'll bet my salary that this gets a laugh."

"We never broke up. Never. Didn't allow it. I think it's phony to break up at your own jokes. Unless it's your style."



I said, "Okay—but you wait in the wings and if it doesn't get a laugh, you're coming on to explain." So I did the sketch and Mel was standing in the wings, trembling. I was the Professor and the Professor was an animal psychologist in this one. I said, "You see that snake in there? Ja? Well, he don't want to be in there. I passed by the snake cage and that snake whispered to me,

'You gotta get me out of here. This place is full of snakes!'

And I looked at him and said, 'What do you want out for? You're a snake, too!'"

(Dead silence)

It got about the same reaction then.

Brooks wasn't a performer at all then, was he?

He always wanted to be a performer. He wrote an article once where he said that, all that time, he was using me as a model. As an experiment.

(He breaks up)

As an experiment to see how his material would really go.

That was nice of him.

Lovely. Listen, everyone can say what they want—the truth will out.

Do you think that his 2000-Year-Old Man character is influenced by your Professor character?

It is the Professor. It gets me when he says he invented it. I mean, he took the character and did his own thing with

'How can you read cue cards and perform at the same time? There's no way. You lose all eye contact with the people you're working with.'



it—but these are my ideas. He took them.

The main thing is not jealousy but give a little credit where credit is due. If I take from people, I take from the masters and I admit it. You don't grow up being funny in a forest. You see these guys—
(Into character) "I was born funny. Right out of the womb. I was getting laughs."

(As himself) Nobody's born funny. But there are people who think they are and that's terrible.

You didn't take any sort of directing credit on Show of Shows?

Well, how much credit can you take? You take all the credit, people don't want to work for you. They want a little of the credit, too. And they deserve it.

Have you ever heard people say you're difficult to work with?

Oh, yeah. Because I would never settle.

If you don't settle, then you're difficult to work with. And the networks don't like people who are difficult. You say to the networks, "You want it good or you want it Thursday?" They always take Thursday.

I can't settle for Thursday. I have to settle for good.

You said earlier that the final authority on what's funny is always the audience. How many people did you have in your audiences?

At the International Theatre, we had 750 people. At City Center, there were close to four thousand.

How did everybody see everything?

Well, what with all the cameras and equipment and everything, there was no place to see the action. So somebody said, "We'll put up a big screen." They put one up at the International, about ten feet by twelve feet, and it worked. It was good for the audience.

Then we moved to the 4,000 seat house and I said we had to get another screen. They said it wouldn't work. They had all the mechanics down on paper—on blueprints—and they said it could not be done.

I said, "Did you try it?"

They said, "It doesn't work out."

And I said, "Did you try it?" We went back and forth like this for almost a week.

Finally, they said, "It's going to cost a hundred thousand dollars to try it."

I said, "You've got twenty million dollars tied up in a show and you can't spend one percent of the budget to find out if it works?" So they gave in and set it up—and it was terrible. Couldn't see anything.

They showed it to me and they said, "See? We told you, we told you—the blueprints said it wouldn't work and, see, it doesn't work."

So I turned around to where the projection was coming from and I yelled one word: "FOCUS!" And they focussed it and it was fine. The blueprints hadn't figured on a different throw-distance in the bigger theatre.

Was your preference for the smaller audience or the larger?

No preference, really.

Did it change the show?

Oh, definitely. What works in a small place doesn't necessarily work in a large place. You must take into consideration your surroundings and your space. Everything has to be taken into consideration—the size of your audience, even the temperature. I don't care how funny you are, if it's too warm they're going to doze off. So you keep the audience a little cold.

What makes you—or anyone—a master of timing?

You can only gauge your timing by how fast the audience reacts.

It's like—handball. As fast as the wall sends the ball back is how fast you have to react to hit it back to the wall again. If the audience is not there, it's like playing handball without the wall.

Not only did you have network folks to contend with but shows were directly sponsored then. Did the advertising people interfere?

No, we never had trouble with that. We had trouble with other things.

Like what?

Like, for instance, we were doing a take-off once of *On the Waterfront*. And Sol Spiegel called and said, "You're doing a satire on my picture . . . I'll take you to court! I'll sue you!"

(Loud crash of dishes from the next room)

What is this, a bowling alley? I never heard so much noise from a break-fast before.

So anyway, I said, "Good. Take a number and sue us."

Well, we did the spoof and never heard from Spiegel until three months later.

He called and said, "Mr. Caesar, could you do that take-off on my picture again? We're re-releasing the film. And I'll give you the script for my new movie and you can do that, too. It's called, *Bridge on the River Kwai*."

See, the spoof made money for him and—

(Another crash)

Are all those dishes from this morning?

You know, a lot of early TV comedians were basically stage performers and they played very broad—people like Milton Berle and Jackie Gleason. You were the first person to scale comedy down for TV.

You have to. The camera's right in front of you. That's who you play to—not the last row of the Pantages.

Did you ever have any desire to play

'You say to the networks, "You want it good or you want it Thursday?" I can't settle for Thursday. I have to settle for good.'

Reiner, Brooks, Caesar, Fabray

SID CAESAR

a serious role?

No. There are much better actors around than me.

Didn't you tell us once that serious actors had influenced you a great deal? Like Spencer Tracy?

Absolutely. You watch good actors or actresses, you learn a lot. About being believable. That's the key to playing a sketch, more than anything else. If you don't believe it, then the audience won't.

I see a lot of stuff on TV today that I just don't believe.

Did you have any scenes with Tracy in It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World?

I had one scene with him and I never got to do it. He always went home at four o'clock. We were out on location and we were about to do the scene. And I kept telling everyone else, "Hurry up, hurry up. I want to get to my scene with Tracy before he leaves." But four o'clock came first, he went home and I was just sick about it.

I ended up doing the scene with Phil Silvers.

Tracy's best scene in that film was a serious phone conversation with Buster Keaton that was cut out, a few weeks after it was released.

I spent the day with Keaton. Amazing man. Amazing comedian. The man was a genius. Did you ever see "The General"?

He did all his own stunts. He did everything. He was the best. He was—

(Loud clatter from the kitchen; Sid starts banging on the table and hollering over the din in gibberish)

And then Larry Gelbart and Neil Simon went out there and Mel Tolkin did this and Howie Morris, boy, what he did and chaffa chaffa yadda yadda and Imogene Coca and—

(Noise stops)

You guys get all that down? I hope you didn't miss a word 'cause that was all

very important, what I said.

Where were we?

Keaton.

Right. Keaton. He spoke out for the little man.

I used to do a thing about an accident prone guy. Just to show people that they're not alone. People think that, out of four-and-a-half billion people, that they're the only one who does anything stupid. But we're all the same person. We're all unique but we're all the same. You can show that through laughter. Keaton did.

A lot of people think that comedians —

—just tell jokes.

No, not that—but that comedians have sad lives.

I used to think that, too. So I had a sad life. I thought a comedian had to be laughing on the outside and crying on the inside.

People make themselves unhappy. They feel they have to suffer and then something good will happen to them. It doesn't work that way.

It's like Keaton with his alcoholism. People wonder how he survived it.

He was a very strong man. Mentally and physically. He could do tricks and stunts that were amazing. He could put one foot on top of a bar and then slowly put the other foot on top of the bar and he'd just be suspended. Amazing.

Chaplin was part acrobat, part ballet dancer. He had to be. They were two different styles but both giants.

People agree that you are also a giant.

That's yet to be seen. That's after it's all over with. It's like being a painter. Whatever is part of you has to come through in your work.

Like Zero Mostel. He was an outrageous performer because he was an outraged man. He was outraged at society, at

everybody. It showed. You draw from what's around you.

Were there rough periods for you after Your Show of Shows?

Oh, yes. When you're doing something for a long period, and all of a sudden you don't have to be there, it comes as sort of a shock. It takes a while to get over it.

How do you cope with that?

To tell you the truth, I don't know what I did.

Was that period when you went through the transformation from the heavy-set Sid Caesar to the thin one? You certainly built yourself up a lot.

Could have been. I don't know.

If you were doing your show today, would it be substantially different?

Oh, yeah.

More topical?

Not more topical, no. But we would take on different subjects. Like the raid at the embassy in Iran that just failed? I would have done something on that raid. I would have shown the planning of that raid and you both would have pished in your pants.

(Caesar changes instantly into a blawhard general) "Well, we got here these AC-DC helicopters. They have to have some oil so that the top things turn around. Then we gotta get one of those things that go up. Then we get a Persian dictionary and a Persian Bible and we're all set. Maybe we'll bring back some Persian rugs while we're there.

You like television, don't you?

Yes. I really do.

Do you have any closing statement?

Yes. Try to allow yourself to be happy and enjoy life. You don't have to go through life looking to be responsible for everything that happens in the world. 'Cause, no matter how you look at it, you're not. I learned a long time ago—don't take yourself too seriously. Enjoy. ☺

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VIC and SADE!

VIC and SADE!

BY IRVING FALK

There are some things you ought to know which you may have missed:

Caldwell Cline from Buffalo, N.Y., invented a washrag with pockets during the Spanish-American War. He could light a cigar by rubbing his feet together.

O.J. Geever, a very stubborn man, ran for coroner and sheriff and mayor and got beat. His life-long ambition was to run for governor and get beat. He told his wife, "I believe I'll climb up on a piano bench and jump off and commit suicide." He jumped off and died.

There was Ollie Hasker, a Belvedere fellow, who told about a fellow who painted his table every day instead of dusting it. The table got so high that he had to get a chair with longer legs and finally ended up near the ceiling.

Atterbury Hippines married Melvina Atkinson who wore a size 5 shoe on the left foot and a 6½ size on the right foot, making Atterbury so mad he screamed like a panther to have to buy shoes two pairs at a time and then have to throw away two shoes.

Rishigan Fishigan, from Sishigan, Michigan, hung around the courthouse yard, married Jane Baine from Paine, Maine. He lived in the penthouse at the Bright Kentucky Hotel. He could get to his room only by shining up the drain-pipe since the outside stairs had been removed to make more room for the passing railroad trains. Firemen on the train threw coal in his windows. His bed often moved around the room and out into the have when a long train came by.



If some of this seems a bit extravagant, take it as such. For it comes from the typewriter of a very talented writer named Paul Rhymmer whose heyday was during the 1930s and 40s with his daily radio serial *Vic and Sade*. Ogden Nash, who along with many other literary and critical figures was a devotee of this serial, said, "I think *Vic and Sade* is one of the all-time great pieces of American humor, and it is not stretching the point very far to mention Paul Rhymmer in the same breath with James Thurber and Mark Twain."

The humor of *Vic and Sade* was low key, Midwest Americana. There were four main characters in the 15-minute, daily (Monday through Friday) series which had its debut June 29, 1932 and went off the air September 29, 1944. It

At a festival in Chicago in October 1976, celebrating that city's "comic spirit," a special seminar was held featuring two of the surviving members of the cast of *Vic and Sade*: Clarence Hartzell, who played Uncle Fletcher and Bill Idelson, who played Rush, the young adopted boy of *Vic and Sade* Gook. Here is how the program got started on a regular basis on radio in Chicago in 1932 according to Billy.

The show started in 1932. We started as a sustaining (no commercials) show on NBC at 8:15 in the morning when nobody heard us. I remember how lonely it was going in that studio. We didn't even have a studio of our own.

We went into a big barn-like studio where Walter Blaufuss played the morning serenade and a few of the musicians stayed around and played our theme song which was "Oh, You Beautiful Doll." This was our first theme song (later changed to "Chanson Bohemienne"). Then the announcer would say, "This is *Vic and Sade*," no commercial, and then as we started the show Walter Blaufuss's orchestra would sneak out for a smoke. They would be putting this cello down and that trombone up and through the whole first five minutes of the show you could hear these bangs and clanging.

We were in, like, a little tent off in the corner so that there wouldn't be reverberation in this tremendous studio. We were in this three-sided tent made of burlap with a big microphone for Bernadine (Flynn, who played Sade) and Van (Art Van Harvey, who played Vic) and a littler microphone for me. During the last five minutes of the show the orchestra would come back in, and they'd start picking up their cellos and their trombones and everything, so there was 'Bang, bang, clatter, clatter.'

There was a kind of hopeless feeling about this whole thing—that nobody was listening to us. The ones that were were hearing all this banging. We had the feeling of whistling past the graveyard: there was nobody there.

But somebody was there, I guess, because after two years of this, suddenly there was a rumor that it was a good show. And finally Crisco picked us up, but there were two years of just filling in the time. Anyway, that's the way the show started. (Transcribed by Barbara Searz in the December 1976 newsletter of the Friends of *Vic and Sade*, an enduring group of devotees.)

Above: Left to right—Russell (David Whitehouse), Vic (Art Van Harvey), Sade (Bernadine Flynn), Uncle Fletcher (Clarence Hartzell). Whitehouse

joined the cast when Billy Idelson (Rush) went into active service as a fighter pilot in World War II.

What in truth was commonplace became monumental when mentioned in the Gook home.

Paul Rhymer at work.



lingered a bit in the half-hour format, sputtered a bit on television and finally faded into the minds and memories of its fans.

There were Vic Gook, his wife Sade, their 12-year-old adopted son Rush Meadows and Uncle Fletcher, who was a much later addition. The cast of characters at the top of this article are those whom Uncle Fletcher knew and about whom he told his tall tales.

Much of the dialog centered on the Gooks' friends and neighbors: Ruthie Sternbottom who used to accompany Sade to the washrag sales at Yamelton's and Y.Y. Flirtich who was always getting hit by fast passenger trains and worked as an armed guard at the Ohio State Home for

the Bald. Rush would often watch the fat men play handball at the Y. His friends were Smelly Clark and Blue Tooth Johnson. Vic worked for the Consolidated Kitchenware Company and was the Exalted Big Dipper in the Drusky Venus Chapter of the Sacred Stars of the Milky Way.

And, as the announcer always said, they were situated "... in the small house halfway up in the next block." A collection of thirty *Vic and Sade* scripts, titled *The Small House Halfway Up in the Next Block*, was edited by Mrs. Rhymer and published by McGraw-Hill in 1972. Ray Bradbury, in a preface to that book, wrote,

"Paul Rhymer was a junk collector.

He collected bits and pieces of mediocrity from all our commonplace occupations, all our insane conversations, all our bored afternoons and evenings. . . . The reason for this book is twofold: To say that middle-class America once was. But to say, just as strongly, middle-class America, with all its values, still is."

One miracle of it is that all the scenes took place in the home of Vic and Sade—on their porch, in the living room, in the cellar—hardly ever away. And through the eyes and conversations of Vic, Sade, Rush and Uncle Fletcher an entire town and its people and values were painted. For a short time the Brain-felles, who were houseguests, spoke. But, no one else would throughout the entire series.

Contained in the collection of "The Paul Rhymer Papers" are 2,182 scripts, on file at the Mass Communications History Center of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin in Madison. This represents about 60 percent of the programs Rhymer wrote for *Vic and Sade* during its broadcast life.

The small Midwest American town in which Vic and Sade lived was never named in the serial. However, it was located in Illinois, a short train-ride from



The Gook family in the studio.
Rhymer is at right.

**VIC and
SADE!**

**VIC and
SADE!**

Chicago. Unofficially, public sentiment and Rhymer's affirmation confirmed that it was really Bloomington, Ill., Rhymer's childhood home.

Perhaps the single most important dramatic property in the serial was the telephone, the listening audience hearing only the Gook side of the conversation. Through this semi-monologue technique, Rhymer was able to carry on full scripts at times. The telephone, a luxury during the Depression, was finding its way into the lives of middle-class America, as was the radio.

What in truth was commonplace became monumental when spoken of in the Gook home. The dozens and dozens of characters who came alive through the eyes of the Gooks and Uncle Fletcher compared in variety and kind with those

found in Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology*. The humor in Rhymer is loving, extravagant, fanciful and hyperbolized. For Rhymer, the age of the common man is the age of a homespun, comic philosophy.

Rhymer's point of view, and the characters he drew, were in sharp contrast with the familiar array of characters found in the usual daily radio serials. None of the Rhymer characters were villainous. The males were neither romantics, nor dominated by a strong, central female character. In the entire history of the serial there was not a single character with amnesia. Infidelity, seduction, financial chicanery, strange diseases, sex, violence, and other "theatricals" were not to be found.

Each daily episode was a complete, one-act play. There were no running plots or the usual Friday cliffhangers. Rhymer was interested in the daily living

Rush's friends
were Smelly Clark and
Blue Tooth Johnson.

of the people in small-town America. His point of view was consistent; his approach humorous and affectionate.

What kind of character was Vic, who is sometimes affectionately referred to as "Gov" by his family? He could be expansive and sentimental, with a tough exterior and a soft inside; a braggart easy to deflate, a resigned cynic, a soft touch for money, a 9-to-5er at his bookkeeper's job at the Consolidated Kitchenware Plant No. 14, a vain and preening peacock, a good provider and devoted husband, a pretender to literary and intellectual pursuits. For the July 26, 1928 episode (an early one before the series aired regularly on radio, first locally in 1932 and then network in 1934), he sums up all 40 years of his living-for-the-moment to Sade:

"Feel fine . . . Got a big day's work under my belt, collected three dollars from Ed Maloney, found an automatic pencil I thought I'd lost, an' outside my office window the birds shook from their throats floods of delicious music. Want a kiss?"

Vic's sense of humor rippled through the dialogue in delicious waves, as in the following bit from the episode of February 1, 1934 in which Vic is playing checkers with Rush:

RUSH: I'd like to figure out a move where I'll get one of yours.

VIC: Sit there long enough and I'll die of old age.

RUSH: Looks like I'm in a bad fix.

VIC: Why doncha move here?

RUSH: Yeah, and let you get two of my men.

VIC: Just a suggestion. Nothing is so wretched as a slow checker player. One of the world's greatest curses.



Vic counsels Sade on proper financial management.

In one episode, Sade's mother is visiting and has occupied Vic's bed for the night. Vic has to sleep on the davenport. Here he is in a polemic of self-pity with satiric literary references between the lines:

"Of course I've been abused. During the long silent watch of this night as I lay on that troubled couch, my feverish brow damp with misery and wretchedness, with both hands I clung to the back of that davenport. If I hadn't I would have fallen off—off I tell you. I might have broken my neck. I hung out my feet, stuck out in the chill night air laden with the dews and damps of pestilence and disease. My arms, being too weighty on my body, were numb with agony. My head, bruised and upbraided from that cruel room, fogged and whirled in the bitter blackness. From the other room—that other room, I heard the soft measured breathing of you and your mother," (6/30/32)

That speech, filled with literary clichés, inflated rhetoric and feigned anger contrasts well with this bit from the July 4, 1932 episode, when Vic allays some of Sade's doubts?

"Sade, listen I've told you this before, and I'll tell you again. I couldn't get to first base without you. Now shut up for a minute. You say we've got nothing to talk about anymore. We got plenty to talk about. Of course, we're not full of gush and talky talk like we used to be. That's kid stuff—it isn't for us anymore. What we've got now is with feeling. I don't know yet how to say it, you don't either probably. But we know about it."

"Siy, this little room we're in, with you in it, sums up just about all that I care about. Down at the office they hand



Vic in full lodge regalia. His title was "Exalted Big Dipper of the Sacred Stars of the Milky Way."

me a lot of tosh. I have to take it. On the street, I'm jostled. Folks look right through me. I'm just an ordinary duck walking down the street or buying a cigar and I'm nobody particularly.

"But I'm somebody here. I know whatever I say is gonna make your brown eyes shine. I can set here in this chair and talk big and brave and make a fool of myself. As long as I stay in this chair and you're here I might just as well be President of the United States."

When measured against the formula for male characters in other daytime serial dramas, often called soap operas after their soap-maker sponsors, Vic was beyond the mold.

What kind of woman was Sade? The traditions of the insecure wife and the knowing female were woven into her character. With a limited formal education, a native intelligence of high order and a love of gossip, the "aillies" and "talky talk," is fused with a sharp sense of what correct social manners should be. Her desire for familial responsibility and a home that is clean and orderly combines with her love for the romanticism of the movies, her frugality and jealousy. At

39, in a forlorn mood, she thinks she has lost the love of Vic, who prefers reading his newspaper, and she says:

"The only time you pay attention to me is when you want me to pass the gravy or press your pants, or massage your scalp. Vic, do you love me as much as you did when you married me? Romance is something that wears out gradually, something that's too fine and fragile to be handled by human beings . . . long after they know it's nothing and never was anything." (3/28/32)

For Sade, the movies were an escape. Once she confesses that she and Vic had doubts and insecurity while on their honeymoon in Dayton after seeing three movies in one afternoon.

Her love for gossip was conditioned by one cardinal rule: she loved to gossip in private, never from her front porch, in the open for all to hear. Her gossip was often mixed with her Midwestern ability to tell the tall story. A good example of this:

"Seems Mr. Scaldier married a girl from Sycamore. And they had the wedding ceremony in Pitson and took supper with her parents immediately afterwards . . . Mr. Scaldier was elaborate and ostentatious and made sign gestures at his bride demonstrating what fork she should use to eat with. I believe the way they tell the story he even whispered loud across the table."

"No, Elizabeth, use the fork with the little prongs! Dampen your mouth with your napkin once in a while, Elizabeth; it looks dainty and ladylike."

"Elizabeth wasn't standin' for that trash. About the third time Mr. Scaldier pulled his little stunt, she calmly got up from the table, snapped the clamps closed on her valise and lit out of there." (7/4/44)

Paul Rhymer's interest in trains is expressed in the compassion he shows for

VIC and SADE!

VIC and SADE!

the Gooks' neighbor, Mr. Donohue. Rhyme must have come to understand and empathize with railroading through his father, who took up the profession in a correspondence course. In one episode, Sade tells Vic of the plight of Mr. Donohue, who

"Instead of being an Inspector of Locomotives, has applied for a demotion to be an ordinary engineer . . . An inspector of locomotives can't sit down . . . he has to stand up. There's only two seats in the engine cab, one for the engineer and one for the fireman. Imagine riding the Kansas City from Chicago to St. Louis—four, five and six hour trip, standing on your feet and hanging onto something to keep from being tossed out on the railroad tracks. . . . He came home faint. After, he could hardly sleep. Mr. Donohue has made up his mind. . . . He'll take his little salary and be happy." (7/22/40)

She describes the inspector's job as one that has dignity. The inspector often wears a shirt, tie, and jacket, an engineer comes home in dirty overalls. But Mr. Donohue could not go to the same restaurants patronized by the other railroaders because his position as inspector precluded fraternizing with the men.

This compassion for the commonplace, and the security that it gave her, was an expression of the 1930s and the Depression, which threatened the everyday life of the common man. It made her observant of the habits and idiosyncrasies of her neighbors. She once observed of Mr. Sludge, who was very sun-burned:

Public curiosity demanded that Rhyme let people see Vic and Sade's hometown. He drew this map as a promotional item.



"He spent his whole noon hour the other day standin' on the sidewalk in front of the ten-cent store lookin' at the window display. I guess he just gets hypnotized by window displays . . . especially like the one the ten-cent store has with all kinds of color and variety. You know, comes in pencils and fancy face powder boxes and sheet music and hair pins and framed pictures of Gloria Goldman and all this, that and the other. Know he spent his whole noon hour standin' there in the bright sun gawking." (7/3/34)

She also observes that Sludge washes his shoes instead of polishing them, an old Ohio custom.

Sade's formal education included only grade school. She confesses in one episode that she has read only three chapters of Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* and that she finds it nonsense. In another episode, she reveals a part of her (and Rhyme's) attitude towards writing:

RUSH: I got something I want to read to you.

SADE: What is it?

RUSH: A theme Mildred Tisdell wrote.

SADE: What's a theme?

RUSH: Oh, a kind of a piece—a little article—

SADE: Composition?

RUSH: Yeah.

SADE: They call them themes now, huh?

RUSH: For high school, they're themes, in grade school they're compositions. (10/4/37)

Rhyme orchestrated the character traits of Vic and Sade to complement each other. Vic was pompous and expansive. Sade was shrewd and sharp.

In the April 1, 1941 episode, Vic tries to outwit Sade, but fails. She wants him to wear a hat with a narrow brim. He likes to wear a hat with a wide cowboy brim, Midwestern style. He buys a new hat with a narrow brim, but each day, before he comes home, he stops off in the hat store and exchanges his hat for another hat of the same style and color except that the brim is imperceptibly wider. He hopes to do this for several weeks, finally arriving at the size brim he prefers. The ruse doesn't work. Sade confronts Vic in this humorous tirade. Note the rhythmic build and the play on the words "broad-brimmed hat" with an emphasis on the explosive "B's":

"Gonna tell you about a certain fella that's bound and determined to wear a broad-brimmed hat. He looks rotten in a broad-brimmed hat. He's been told ten-million times he looks rotten in a broad-brimmed hat. But still he works away like a beaver figuring up ways of getting hold of a broad-brimmed hat.

"When you came home that first day the hat you were wearing was nice and becoming and well-fit in a hat.

"The second day when I saw your hat, I was just a tiny bit perplexed.

"Brim was even broader the third day. When the brim seemed still broader, I smelt a mouse. I smelt it strong.

"The fourth day, of course, I knew. The fifth and sixth days, I just watched with curiosity. The hat you brought home today wasn't any broader in the brim than the one you brought home yesterday. I saw that at last you had reached the climax."

On the other hand, when Sade uses the same ruse on him, it works. She wants to get rid of his pile of old newspapers in the cellar and he wants to save them. In that episode, she calls him down into the cellar every few weeks to order him to throw out the papers. He refuses.

Through the
conversations of Rhymer's
four characters,
an entire town and
its people and values
were painted.

She has already thrown out half the pile each time she calls him downstairs, getting him accustomed to the size of the pile. Vic's suspicions are never aroused.

One day, talking with Uncle Fletcher, she describes the inertia of the age of the common man:

SADE: Miss McNustle, in my Thimble Club, lives in the 900 block there.

FLETCHER: Is that a fact?

SADE: I believe she's lived there all her life.

FLETCHER: You don't say.

SADE: Kind of remarkable thing.

FLETCHER: Yes.

SADE: She was born in the 800 block on North Oak Street and her name was Olive Hudell. Charlie McNustle was born just two houses away. When they grew up they got married and they took a house across the street in the 800 block on North Oak Street. See. They were both born there and they both still live there.

FLETCHER: Very likely they'll both die there. (3/4/43)

Rhymer made Sade a vital character, with a freshness beyond the routine formula of the serial drama. As Meredith once pointed out in his famous essay on humor, in a society where woman is a first-class citizen, comedy of a high order is possible.

With Rush, an adopted, 12-year-old son, Rhymer was able to vary situations using the character contrasts among Vic, Sade and Rush. Rhymer would often pace his situations so that each character was featured in consecutive order through the week. Also, each actor in the serial could be written out for vacations and sick leave when necessary. That is how Uncle Fletcher appeared as a speaking part in the serial. Although Uncle

Fletcher and his fantastic friends were mentioned through letters beginning with 1935's Hallowe'en episode, he appeared for the first time in a speaking role on the episode of August 27, 1940; the actor playing Vic had been hospitalized after suffering a heart attack.

Needless to say, once arrived, he stayed. From Dixon, Ill., Uncle Fletcher was a pragmatic, eccentric, opportunistically deaf, tall-tale rhapsodizer in his mid-sixties. Self-conscious about his dress, domineering, frugal, intensely self-reliant, he no longer worked but did not lack for economic support.

The characters were the situations. Never was character integrity sacrificed for laughs or for plot machinations. Here lies the strength, skill and enduring value of Rhymer's writing.

Rhymer loved the tall story and extracted a great deal of humor from it. It's a trait of the frontier and the frontiersmen who would return to civilization and elaborate on their adventures. Here's Rush, in one such mood:

RUSH: Ever hear the great myth about the fella that blew on his hands?

SADE: No.

RUSH: An old couple that lived in the country was sittin' home one winter night and there was a knock at the door. Turned out to be a stranger they had never seen. He came inside and started to blow on his hands. The old couple said, "Why are you blowing your breath on your hands?"

He said, "To warm them."

They'd never heard of that before. But they said, "Here, have a bowl of hot soup." The stranger took a spoonful of soup and then began to blow on it. The old couple said, "What's the idea of that?"

The stranger said, "The soup's too hot. I'm cooling it off a little." (Rush chuckles)

And then they threw him out into the snow. (12/6/39)

There is no blowing hot or cold about Rhymer. For after these many years, time for reflection and judgment, his writing still blows hot with brilliance. ☞



Rush, Sade and Vic entertain themselves during a quiet evening at home

AUG • 1960

HELP!



I'm a Prisoner of the Future

What do Gloria Steinem, Woody Allen, John Cleese, Dick Van Dyke, Tom Poston, Sylvia Miles, Henny Youngman, R. Crumb, Terry Gilliam, Orson Bean, and Jack Carter have in common? Choose one:

- A. They all work for the CIA, KGB, MI5, all three or any combination thereof.
- B. They are all alter-egos of Peter Sellers.
- C. They have all acted in fumetti in *HELP!* magazine.
- D. All of the above.

If you chose answers A, B, or D, you

are probably either a moderate Republican or a Socialist Worker and chances are you're better off skipping the rest of this article and proceeding to *Amusing Exit Wounds* by Dr. T. Noguchi or *The Wit and Warmth of John Foster Dulles*.

If, however, you chose answer "C" you're probably an all-right fun-person who's kind to small animals, even if you've never heard of *HELP!* magazine or don't know from fumetti.

HELP! magazine was created and edited by Harvey Kurtzman, the man who had introduced "hoo HAH!" to the young readers of America in the pages of *MAD*. *HELP!* didn't last too long. The first issue hit the stands in August, 1960 and the last issue was shipped to the remainder warehouse in September, 1965. In that short span it vainly tried to plug the gap between *MAD* and the *New Yorker*, a task akin to filling the Grand Canyon with cotton balls, or getting rid of roaches forever.

At this point it would have been nice to be able to say that *HELP!* was the

realization of a life-long dream of Harvey Kurtzman's, to produce an intelligent, unpretentious, adult humor magazine . . . But that's in the movie version. Nineteen-sixty wasn't a very hot year for Kurtzman. He had severed his ties with *MAD* years before, and more recently he had taken a personal drubbing in the failure of two humor mags in a row: *Trump*, and *Humbug*.

The humor business had become unfunny for Kurtzman. In 1960 he was editing a 35 cent dreadful called *Wildest Westerns* (gag captioned stills from "B" Westerns), when publisher James Warren made him an offer he couldn't refuse. Warren's main line of business is publishing monster magazines which also merchandise nifty rubber feet, glow-fangs and plastic spiders. Warren wanted to put his money back into publishing and a satire magazine seemed like a good idea at the time—after all, *MAD* was making money hand over fist, and only a year away from being sold for three million 1961 dollars.

And so, with an extremely limited budget, *HELP!* went into production. The entire editorial staff, aside from Kurtzman, consisted of one bright beginner, eager to get her start in the magazine business. She had been recommended to Kurtzman by Harold Hayes (then editor of *Esquire*) her name: Gloria Steinem. Apparently, her prime asset was an uncanny ability to weasel big name celebrities into posing free for cover photos.

But *HELP!* didn't have a chance

By Larry Hama

frame. The over-all effect was more analogous to a movie-frame blow-up series than to the standard comic strip.

In "Muse Me," a fumetti written by Ed Fisher, an artist stands at his easel working on a painting for an advertising agency. "No. 73 in their series of Great Mental Ideas of Human Man—An illustration of P.T. Barnum's immortal phrase." He's having trouble "formulating definitive plastic terms for the concepts of 'sucker-ness,' 'born-ness,' and



from the start. Hell, it was too weird! I mean, like, some of the comic strips didn't even have punchlines! There was a lot of cheesecake and a regular feature called "Kissies" that was down-right obscene! None of it followed the formulas! There wasn't a joke in every panel! No movie parodies! And hardly any anal re-tentive comics with hordes of background figures! Instead there was a comic about a warthog with super-powers and sketchbooks about life in Bulgaria! And there were fumettis.

Fumettis are comic strips utilizing photographs in place of drawings. Literally, the word *fumetti* means "puff of smoke" and is possibly an Italian folk-reference to airbrushed word balloons typical of early *Foto-Romanzi*. But while Italian fumettis are soap operas aimed at a housewife audience, Kurtzman's fumettis were bizarre glimpses into an alternate universe. A typical fumetti, titled "Baby, It's Occult Outside," featured Tom Poston as an office worker who stripped the clothes off a secretary (Sylvia Miles) with telekinesis, then turned her into a chocolate malt and drank it, because that's what he really wanted.

Although Harvey Kurtzman never wrote a *HELP!* fumetti, he produced and directed all of them, thereby infusing them with his characteristic zaniness. *HELP!* fumettis read with the same easy flow and cosmic comic vitality that animated all of his great work in early *MAD* parodies. Characters prance through the visual continuity like burlesque *Bowos* on speed. The rapid-fire verbal exchanges were punctuated by sound effects that appeared to have been lettered by Kurtzman himself. Lighting changed for no apparent reason to heighten the impact of a closeup. The point-of-view could freeze for a page or two—the background remaining constant as characters slipped in and out of the



'every minute-ness.' " Suddenly, behind him appears a well-stacked miniature blonde in a miniature mini-dress. She is a Muse, come to inspire him with the lush curves of her beauteous bod as she has inspired Praxiteles, Velasquez, and Van Gogh in the past. But the artist has long abandoned The Figure. He is a "Neo-Subexpressionist Tachist—A school that shuns both representation and expression."

Depressed by their personal failures the blocked artist and the failed muse seek inspiration in a bottle of aquavit (the only thing a Neo-Subexpressionist Tachist can turn to for ideas). Pretty soon, they're rolling in the sack, exploring the myriad textures of Tachism and violating all sorts of unwritten codes pertaining to the virginity of goddesses.

You never saw anything like that in the pages of *MAD*. Nor in the *New Yorker*, for that matter. Hey, this was 1960, when you didn't see stuff like that anywhere. And then there were the *kissies*.

Kissies were photographs but they weren't fumettis in the strictest sense, as they had no real story line or narrative. Kissies were simply cheesecake with one major difference. You participated! Yes! You watched with sweating palms as a ravishing voluptuary sheathed in a shimmering, slinky chemise slithered towards you panel by panel, lips parted and glistening, eyes flashing, arms outstretched, beckoning you to turn the page.

After you had participated, you could get on to the serious business of reading the cartoon strips. These weren't cutesy confections about little kids and their puppies, pleasant vignettes about suburban married life, nor clever castigations of the system mouthed by crudely drawn young men in patched turtle-necks. The cartoons in *HELP!* had a sort of taint, as if the paper they were drawn on

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and/or Harvey Kurtzman

had been used to wrap pork chops that glow in the dark. They featured characters such as Philbert Desenex, mild-mannered reporter for the *Mutalode Morning Mishap* who is in reality Wonder Wart-Hog (otherwise known as "the Hog of Steel"). Gilbert Shelton's Wonder Wart-Hog was big and ugly—the type of guy who could gleefully jump up and down on the bad guy's head until it was a pulpy smear, crush evil granny ladies with one powerful blow, or nonchalantly



particular issue because he had blown most of the budget on the fumetti, he reprinted classic pieces that had long been out of print and virtually forgotten. The outrageous Milt Gross and the astounding Winsor McKay, Will Eisner's "Spirit," J.H. Dowd and Heinrich Kley—All in black and white, for 35 cents.

When I asked Kurtzman if editing *HELP!* had ever stopped being fun, he replied; "Fun? It was *always* fun . . . and it was *never* fun."

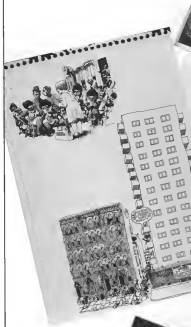


process a villain through a meat grinder (lots of terrific fantasy fulfillment in that one).

Kurtzman had no qualms about publishing the uncategorizable early work of underground comics luminary R. Crumb. For the most part, these were dark, brooding pieces that gave little hint of the anarchic cartoon carnival style that was to become Crumb's trademark in the acid wars of the late 60s—densely delineated drawings torn from sketchbooks compiled in Bulgaria and Harlem. Brilliant, touching and funny, but gloomy as hell.

Monty Python's wunderkind animator Terry Gilliam earned his cartoonist wings as associate editor of *HELP!* He was the new kid in town, fresh out of school and all set to take the funny-book world by storm. He soon found out that the funny-books had nailed down their storm-shutters sometime around 1957 and had never bothered to take them down again. In 1965, when *HELP!* finally folded, the cartoon biz was deadsville. Gilliam decided to try his luck in Britain. Besides, he knew somebody there—an actor named John Cleese who had once appeared in a *HELP!* fumetti. As it happened, Cleese and some other fellows were putting together a comedy troupe and a cartoonist was the very thing they were looking for. The rest is herpetological history.

To most magazine editors, cartoons are filler. Cheap laughs in varying sizes to jazz up empty pages or cover gaps in a page of copy. To Kurtzman, cartoons were the main course and he printed some sterling work by some of the best graphic storytellers and comic illustrators of the time. Browsing through random copies of *HELP!* you found macabre funnyness by Gahan Wilson, silly doodles by Arnold Roth, intense cross-hatching by John Severin and big feet by Jack Davis. When Kurtzman ran out of money for a



A starbuck's moment
Scholarship Qual

HARLEM

I'm not a communist, I'm a communist

R. Crumb



'Magazines can be sold out from under the talent that created them.'

obvious factor was—I was trying to do something that I thought was funny. I was doing it for myself.

The second factor was budget. What I learned as a result of doing the western magazine was a Warren technique where you could put out a magazine for next to nothing if you worked with stock-shot photographs that were

easily available for nothing—public domain stuff. And our budget was something incredibly low, like 15 cents.

So that was my second guiding principle—I was putting out a magazine using all of these cut-out, paste-up, stock-shot picture techniques with a minimum of new cartooning.

But some of the fumettis appear to be big productions.

We used to do those fumettis inside a budget of about \$1,000. We used to shoot them in a day. We would work like animals from sunup to sunset. Sometimes it would slip over into another day, but it was all incredibly cheap stuff.

Warren mentioned something about walking into a bank with a Thompson sub-machine-gun in order to get arrested for publicity.

We rented a bunch of Thompson machine-guns with those circular barrels (magazines). We were doing a Tom Poston cover and a Terry Gilliam fumetti with Woody Allen in it.

Woody Allen was some sort of kingpin?

Yes, and I seem to remember that Warren did indeed walk through—I'm not sure. He did something, or somebody did something.

With a machine-gun?

That was probably true. Nobody raised an eyebrow.





Jim Warren

The machine gun incident?

Probable scenario: We're sitting around the *HELP!* offices with the machine gun. Harvey, myself, Harry Chester, Gloria (Steinem), whoever. We're all there, musing over the fact that,



Gary Kassisick

"Hey, one of us should walk into a bank with the machine gun the day the magazine goes on sale. When we're arrested we can claim it's on sale and they'll print a picture of the cover along with whoever's behind bars and it'll do great things for the magazine."

Which one of us should do this? Raise your hand.

Nobody raised their hand and then it was "conversation over." I think that probably took place—we were nuts enough to think along those lines.

Then it was probably Harvey who said, "Jim, why don't YOU do it? And I'll bail you out in a few weeks." And that's the kind of conversation that kicked around. Funny ideas.

You want me to capsulize the *HELP!* experience?

Right.

Never have so few done so much for so many.

That's splendid.

Isn't that splendid! I agree with that.

The few—meaning the few people who were involved in the creation, production and execution of it.

So much—meaning what was turned out and produced of high quality.

For so many—meaning all the world, including yourself, who remembered after 10 these many years.



'Hey, one of us should walk into a bank with a machine-gun the day the magazine goes on sale.'



Paul Coker, Jr. &
Charles Alverson



Kissies were
cheesecake with
a difference—
you participated.



Gloria Steinem

I haven't seen Harvey in ages. Is he okay?

Oh, he's doing fine. Doing the funny stuff and Jim Warren is —

Is he still doing monster comics and all that?

He's such a character.

Could you talk about your tenure as associate editor of HELP!?

I came to New York with no money and no job and was introduced to Harvey Kurtzman by an *Esquire* editor. Harvey was just then starting *HELP!*

It was such an education, you know, to be in such a small group of people. Including lay-out, there were maybe three or four of us, putting together an entire magazine, which means that you learn a very great deal about magazines very fast. Especially because magazines in this town are like community; there would be *New Yorker* cartoonists or *Esquire* humorists or whatever, even though this was a much smaller magazine. It was a great learning experience.

You got to do just about everything connected with the magazine?

Yeah, it was very valuable. It's hard to find an experience like that, I know now. I see people





looking for jobs, looking for training. Each individual division of a normal magazine is so big, you don't get that kind of experience at all.

When I say doing everything, I mean getting the cover subject, getting the props, getting the photographer. The real education.

This was your first magazine

job in New York?

Yes. It wasn't full-time. I've forgotten what it was, three or four days a week, something like that. I don't remember exactly, but it turned out to be full-time.

Harvey is a really remarkable center of activity. Lots of humorists and artists have gotten their start with him. I don't know if you are planning to write about this, but the tragedy—well, I don't mean *tragedy*—Harvey is doing fine—but the unfairness of Harvey's situation, with his invention of *MAD* as an employee on a salary, is that he did it in his attic totally by himself. And really, I don't think he profited very much—and certainly not fairly—from its success.

Maybe that was some subliminal instruction to me that caused us (*Ms.*) to end up as the only magazine that's controlled by a staff, not by its publisher. I don't know; I wasn't conscious of it at the time, but maybe that had some influence. It was also the sale of *New York*. You realize that the magazines can be just sold out from under the talent that created them and the people who work on them have nothing to say about it.

At any rate, let me tell you that both Harvey and Jim had nothing but praise about you.

Aw, that's nice. It was a great, crazy adventure. I'm grateful to them. I learned a lot.

'Three or four of us put together the entire magazine. It was such an education.'



BELIEVING IN

By Alison Wickwire

Buster Keaton had a power—over his body, the camera and the audience—shared by very few performers. Like his early mentor, Harry Houdini, he went beyond entertainment, touching lives in personal, unexpected ways.

He touched some more than others, but hardly any more than Debbie David and Nancy Johnson. To them, Buster lives, breathes, makes films and, a trick Houdini only promised, speaks from beyond the grave.

The comedy of Buster Keaton was sublimely physical. From a fall to collapsing scenery, he was like no one else. As a cinematographer he also stood above his peers. Eventually he went studio, fought alcoholism, endured three marriages and ended up appearing in beach-party movies and television commercials at the end of a 40-year career. One bright

spot toward the end was a classy turn in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*.

A prevailing theory attributes Buster's flexible body to a childhood defense against his father's walloping him around the stage in a family vaudeville act. This physical endurance was enhanced, so the story goes, by learning at his godfather Harry Houdini's knee. The springy grace in Keaton's filmed movements are missing in other, more famous stars of the era.

His cheekbones were high, his jaw lean and strong. As a young man, Keaton was irrefutably beautiful. And after you study old stills and candid photos from collectors' drawers, his face begins to haunt you. He had those eyes described through ages of cliché as "burning," "piercing," and "hypnotizing."

Such features have hypnotized people since the dawn of time. More recently, with electronic media of indisputably mass appeal, a more specialized, more interesting mass phenomenon occurs. Young, usually adolescent, girls give their hearts to beautiful, lithe men they know only from the movies, television or from pop records. Compared to the nerds they see at school, their idols are impossibly mature and sophisticated. The pandemonium that dogged Valentino and the Beatles proves how enduring and impassioned such devotion can be.

Girls reclaim their hearts as soon as their male schoolmates outgrow their nerd-ness, but a few mature, talented women remain under their idol's spell.

Nancy and Debbie are under his spell. They collect, discuss, adore and fantasize, endlessly turning out replicas

B U S



Debbie David and Nancy Johnson

of their idol: tiny paper dolls, big cloth dolls, statues, illustrations, cartoons, animated films and a huge, google-eyed paper head.

Nancy Johnson shares a Village apartment with Jerry Beck. His passion is cartoons, hers Keaton. They are insatiable collectors.

Both work during the day, at jobs they say have nothing to do with their "real" lives. They met on the stairs at the New School.

Before moving to New York, Nancy studied acting. She is gleeful, shy and sincere. She gives out blinding smiles as we pore over Hollywood scandal sheets of the 1930's and other rarities, like a photograph of the Keaton family vaudeville act with mother Myra Keaton blowing sax. America's first female saxophone player, she tells me.

"You should remember I knew her before she was Keatonized," interjects Jerry. "She's very talented." Nancy declines a request for her Harpo impression.

Debbie David doesn't do Harpo. A pretty girl with an expansive mouth and warm brown eyes, she's a little overweight and uncomfortably aware of it.

Her "temporary" room in her parents' house in Queens is dotted with Buster Keaton replicas. Tiny paper dolls costumed for any part, just pick a movie. She calls them "Malecules." The French name for Buster is *Malec*, loosely translated as the "hole-in-the-doughnut."

"A bag of Malecule bones," she says, gesturing to a heap of twist-ties. A look over my shoulder assures me at least four small Keatons are watching from any given angle of the room. There are two

dozen of them. One has a teddy bear. Another, her favorite, holds a shiny red heart.

"I gave him that for Valentine's Day," she confides.

In her essay, "Dissection of Artistic Fanaticism," she describes the feeling:

Her room reverberates with her obsessive and imaginative work. All Keatons, Posters and dolls. Puppets expertly modeled, painted and clothed with a sharp eye for detail and an unmistakable artistic integrity.

"A Malecule mutant," she says, handing over a foot-long doll. Photographs are proffered: a Buster puppet trussed up on a platter of artificial lettuce with a little red apple in his mouth; a Buster de Milo, armless in swaddling clothes. One of the Malecules looks beat up. I am told he starred in a stop-action

TER

BELIEVING IN BUSTER



animated film she made and took a lot of folding.

"When something fascinates me, people think I tend to go a little overboard. Maybe I do, to them, but for me it becomes an intense analysis. It can run for a few days . . . or last over a period of a few years. For two years, so far, Buster Keaton has been one such source . . . The material and the spiritual are united, beginning a strong period of fanaticism."

She studied animation at Cal Arts

Ever mindful of the spirits' treachery, Debbie eliminated impostors with the question: "What was your first two-reeler?"

O-N-E W-E-E-K, quoth the spirit, adding that it couldn't write very well.

It writes well enough to make jokes and to fabricate very interesting words. And to suddenly turn the interview to sex.

W-O-U-N-D I-N P-O-T-A-F-O-B, was the answer to a question about an

Debbie's Room

for two years and plans to return unless appropriate work can be found in the meantime. At the moment, she's considering a camera-person job "to learn more about it."

Debbie is already a filmmaker of talent, having made two animated films of her own, both starring the Malecules.

In one, the Malecule is pitted against a set of billiard balls. The cue ball is, of course, the good guy. Buster and the cue win out, but it's a struggle.

The other film is better still. Mr. Malecule wants to paint the town red, so he goes to buy paint via subway: The image of that tiny paper creature swinging from a subway strap in indelible. Mission accomplished, another Malecule strolls on the set to say, "You painted it vermillion, you know." And the small stone face stares.

She also produces stacks of animation drawings, mostly a Malecule Superhero spoof called *The Leader*.

After the screening, a remarkable set of documents emerge—transcriptions of her conversations with Keaton's, uh, spirit, in the worldly form of a Ouija board.

They are genuine, she assures me.

injury during a stunt from *Our Hospitality*.

Potafob?

"The male sex organ," Debbie explains.

Keaton's potafob comes up more than once. She often feels his presence: "the cold fluff." He visited nightly for a period of time. It scares her sometimes.

The transcriptions are long and detailed. Buster comments on her friends, the Malecules, the dolls, expressing clear preferences. He likes one, Debbie feels, because it's anatomically correct and the other is not.

Malecules live in Nancy's sea of collectibles, too. She appeared—with silent film buff and impressionist-Actor Paul Kuhn—in Debbie's painting—Malecule short.

Nancy's sketchbook overflows with delicious creatures, reminiscent of good, old-fashioned Disney. Her characterization of Keaton is different—sweeter, than Debbie's but every bit as vivid and intense.

"It's so physical and visual and it's so funny," Nancy says. "OOOH! I'm so glad I'm a girl and can feel this way."






"I love him."

Photos: Christine Rodin



THE SEASON'S SIT-COMS



	SUPPLIER	PRODUCERS
Angie	 Paramount—Miller/Milbus	Executive Producer: Leonard Thuna Producer: Harry Cooley
The Associates	John Charles Walters Productions in association with Paramount Television	Executive Producers: James L. Brooks, Stan Daniels, Ed. Weinberger Producer: Michael Lesons
Barney Miller	 Four D Productions	Executive Producer: Danny Arnold Producer: Tony Sheehan
Benson	Witt/Thomas/Harris Productions	Executive Producers: Tony Thomas, Paul Junger Witt
Detective School	Rukoff/Harris Partnership Production	Executive Producers: Bernie Kukoff, Jeff Harris
Goodtime Girls	A Miller/Milbus/Boyett Production in association with Paramount Television	Executive Producers: Thomas L. Miller, Edward K. Milbus, Robert L. Boyett Producer: Leonard Thuna
Happy Days	A Miller/Milbus Production in association with Paramount Television	Executive Producers: Thomas L. Miller, Edward K. Milbus, Garry K. Marshall
Laverne and Shirley	A Miller/Milbus Production with Henderson Production Company in association with Paramount Television	Executive Producers: Garry K. Marshall, Thomas L. Miller, Edward K. Milbus Producers: Arthur Silver, Nik Abdo
Mork and Mindy	Miller/Milbus/Henderson in association with Paramount Television	Executive Producers: Garry K. Marshall, Tony Marshall Producers: Dale McRaven, Bruce Johnson
A New Kind of Family	 Gordon Eisner Productions	Executive Producer: Margie Gordon Producer: Jane Eisner
One in a Million	A TOY Production in association with Columbia Pictures Television	Producers: Saul Turteltaub, Bernie Chertan
Out of the Blue	 A Miller/Milbus Production in association with Paramount Television	Executive Producers: Justin Kalish, Erna Kalish Producers: Bill Bickly, Dick Warren
The Ropers	Nichol/Ross/West Production in association with TTC Productions	Executive Producers: Dan Nichol, Michael Ross, Bernie West
Semi-Tough	 A Universal City Studios Inc. Production	Executive Producer: David Merrick Producer: Bud Wiser








Comedy is king on prime-time. Most of last season's top television shows were comedies. Unfortunately, so were most of the ratings losers.

Adding a laugh-track is no guarantee of success. Sit-coms are an incestuous business. Most come from the same three or four suppliers,

and rely on an ever-shrinking pool of creative talent. The situations of most sit-coms are exceptionally similar as well.















CAST	TIME SLOT	FIRST EPISODE	SITUATION SUMMARY
Donna Pescow, Robert Hayes, Doris Roberts, Delvaire Scott	Saturday, 8:30 Tuesday, 8:30 Saturday, 8	February, 1979	A poor waitress marries a rich doctor, to the dismay of both families.
Wilfred Hyde-White, Joe Regalbuto, Alley Mills, Martin Short, Shelley Smith, Tim Thomerson	Sunday, 8:30 Thursday, 9:30	September 15, 1979	Enthusiastic young law school graduates join one of the most staid, stodgy, tradition-bound firms on Wall Street.
Neil Linden, Ron Carey, Max Gail, Ron Glass, Steve Landenberg	Thursday, 9	January 23, 1975	The detectives in New York's 12th Precinct deal with the many problems, major and minor, that are part of their daily routine.
Robert Guillaume, James Noble, Inga Swenson, Misty Gold, Caroline McWilliams	Thursday, 8:30	September, 1979	An experienced butler runs the governor's mansion during the first term of an honest but inept governor.
James Gregory, Randolph Mantooth, LaWanda Page, Pat Proft, Douglas V. Fowley, Taylor Negron	Saturday, 8:30		An unusual assortment of students attend a night school for detectives.
Annie Potts, Lorna Patterson, Georgia Engel, Francine Tacker, Marcia Lewis, Marvin Goldsmith, Peter Scolar, Adrian Zmed	Tuesday, 8:30 Saturday, 8:30	January 22, 1980	Four working girls share an apartment in Washington, DC during World War II.
Ron Howard, Henry Winkler, Tom Basley, Marian Ross, Anson Williams, Danny Mast, Erin Moran	Tuesday, 8	January 15, 1974	Four college students grow up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin during the 1950s.
Penny Marshall, Cindy Williams, David Lander, Michael McKean, Eddie Mekka	Thursday, 8 Tuesday, 8:30 Monday, 8	January 27, 1976	Two young women work in the bottle-cap division of the Shatz Brewery in Milwaukee in the late 1950s.
Robin Williams, Pam Dawber, Tom Poston, Jay Thomas, Gina Hecht	Sunday, 8 Thursday, 8	September 14, 1978	The adventures of an alien in Boulder, Colorado, as he learns about humans.
Eileen Brennan, Owynne Gifford, Rob Lowe, Loun Hendlar, David Hallander, Connie Hearn	Sunday, 7:30 Saturday 8:30	September 16, 1979	Two single mothers, one divorced, one widowed, share a house together with their children.
Shirley Hemphill, Richard Paul, Carl Ballantine, Dorothy Fuldling, Ralph Wilcox, Keene Curtis	Saturday, 8	January 8, 1980	A cab driver inherits a fortune when one of her steady customers dies, making her one of the richest and most powerful women in the world.
James Brogen, Eileen Heckart, Dixie Carter, Hannah Dean, Clark Brandon, Tammy Lauren, Olivia Barash, Jason Keller, Shane Keller	Sunday, 7	September 9, 1979	An angel is sent to earth to straighten out five orphans.
Norman Fell, Audra Lindly	Saturday, 8 Saturday, 8:30	March, 1979	Stanley Roper and his wife, Helen, sell their apartment building and take up a new life as householders in a condominium townhouse.
Josh Taylor, Mary Louise Weller, Douglas Barr	Sunday, 10:30	January 6, 1980	Two fun-loving football players huddle to tackle the sticky problem of keeping their childhood friend from marrying someone she doesn't love.

THE SEASON'S SIT-COMS

Soap		Witt/Thomson/Harris Productions	Executive Producers: Paul Junger Witt, Tony Thomas Supervising Producer: Susan Harris
Taxi		John Charles Walters Productions In association with Paramount Television	Executive Producers: James L. Brooks, Stan Daniels, Ed. Weinberger, David Davis Producers: Glen Charles, Les Charles
Three's Company		Nichol/Ross/West Production In association with TTC Productions	Executive Producers: Don Nichol, Michael Ross, Bernie West
When the Whistle Blows		Daydream Productions	Executive Producers: Leonard Goldberg, Jerry Weintraub Producers: Rick Husky, Carroll Newman, Gerald Sanford, Norman Fox
CBS 		SUPPLIER	PRODUCERS
Alice		Warner Brothers Television	Executive Producer: Chris Hayward Producers: Madelyn Davis, Bob Carroll, Jr.
Archie Bunker's Place		Tandem Productions	Executive Producer: Mort Lachman Producer: Milt Josephberg
The Bad News Bears		Silver/Briner In association with Paramount Television	Executive Producers: Arthur Silver, Bob Briner
Flo		Warner Brothers Television	Executive Producer: Jim Mulligan Supervising Producers: Ron Landry, George Geiger, Tom Belser Co-Producer: Jerry McPhee
Getting There		Ulla Garrett Productions In association with Metromedia Producers Corp.	Executive Producer: Ulla Garrett Associate Producer: John Whittle
House Calls		Universal Television	Executive Producer: Jerome Davis Producer: Sheldon Keller
The Jeffersons		TAT Communications In association with NEW Productions	Executive Producers: Don Nichol, Michael Ross, Bernie West
The Last Resort		MTM Productions	Executive Producer: Grant Tinker Producer: Gary David Goldberg
M*A*S*H		20th Century Fox Television	Executive Producer: Gene Reynolds Producer: Bart Matzoffa
Never Say Never		Fox R Productions In association with Warner Brothers Television	Executive Producers: Leonard A. Rosenberg, Elliot Shoenman Producer: Lee Miller

Katherine Helmond, Robert Mandan, John Byner, Tati Sassi, Billy Crystal, Richard Mulligan, Diana Canova, Cathryn Damon	Thursday, 9:30	September 13, 1977	A satire of soap operas that focuses on two sisters who live next door to each other.
Judd Hirsch, Jeff Conaway, Danny DeVito, Tony Danza, Mariu Henner, Andy Kaufman	Tuesday, 9:30	September 12, 1978	The personal and professional fortunes of a group of New York cab drivers.
Joyce DeWitt, John Ritter, Suzanne Somers, Don Knotts	Tuesday, 9	March 24, 1977	Three friends share an apartment.
Doug Barr, Philip Brown, Susan Buckner, Sue Ann Langdon, Tim Rossovich, Dolph Sweet	Friday, 8	March 14, 1980	A lighthearted look at the rough and tumble world of heavy construction people, who work hard and play harder when the work is done.
CAST	TIME SLOT	FIRST EPISODE	SITUATION SUMMARY
Linda Lavin, Vic Tayback, Patti Halliday, Beth Howland, Philip McKean, Diane Ladd	Sunday, 9	September 29, 1976	An aspiring singer with a son to raise makes ends meet by waiting on tables in a diner.
Carroll O'Connor, Martin Balsam, Anne Meara	Sunday, 8	January 12, 1971 as All in the Family	Archie Bunker runs his neighborhood bar with a Jewish partner and several wacky employees.
Jack Warden, Catherine Hicks, Sparky Marcus, Meeno Peuce, J. Brennan Smith, Christoff St. John	Saturday, 8:30	March, 1979	A middle-aged single man tries to coach a hopeless Little League team.
Patty Halliday, Geoffrey Lewis, Jim B. Baker, Sodie Bond, Joyce Bulfant, Leo Burnett, Lucy Lee Flippin, Stephen Keep	Monday, 9:30	March 24, 1980	Flo quits her waitress job and buys a Texas beer hall.
George S. Irving, Brett Somers, Jane Connell, Cathryn Damon, Norman Fell, Todd Susman, Dub Taylor, Tim Thomson, Diane Venora	Tuesday, 8	February 12, 1980	A husband and wife run a cross-country automobile delivery agency.
Wayne Rogers, Lynn Redgrave, David Wayne	Monday, 9:30	January, 1980	A doctor and hospital administrator try to carry on a romance in the middle of a busy, crazy hospital.
Sherman Hemsley, Isabelle Sanford	Sunday, 9:30	January 18, 1975	A black family strikes it rich and moves into an exclusive East Side apartment building.
Larry Breeding, Stephanie Faracy, Robert Costanzo, Zane Lasky, Walter Oleniwick, Ray Underwood, John Jickles	Wednesday, 8 Monday, 8:30	September, 1979	A mountain resort hotel, peaceful to the guests, is a madhouse for the young college students who work there on their summer vacations.
Alan Alda, Harry Morgan, Mike Farrell, Loretta Swit, James Farr	Monday, 9	September 17, 1972	An Army medical team tries to laugh away the tensions of the Korean war.
George Kennedy, Anne Schedeen, Irene Tedrow, Bruce Kimmel, Rick Padell	Saturday, 10:30	July 11, 1979 (repeated March 15, 1980)	A widower falls in love with a younger woman who happens to be a doctor.

THE SEASON'S SIT-COMS

One Day at a Time		TAT Communications and Allwhet Inc. Prod.	Executive Producers: Norman Paul, Jack Elinson Producers: Dick Bensfield, Perry Grant
Pottsville		Elmar Productions	Executive Producers: Rod Parker, Hal Cooper Producer: Gene Marciano
The Stockard Channing Show		Little Bear Productions	Executive Producer: Aaron Ruben Producer: George Yanak
Struck by Lightning		Fellows/Keegan Company in association with Paramount Television	Executive Producers: Arthur Fellows, Terry Keegan Producer: John Thomas Fellows
We're Cruisin' (California Fever)		Warner Brothers Television	Executive Producer: Philip Mandelker Producer: Mel Swepe
WKRP in Cincinnati		MTM Productions	Executive Producer: Grant Tinker Producer: Hugh Wilson
Working Stiffs		Paramount Television	Executive Producers: Arthur Silver, Bob Brunner Supervising Producer: Mark Sorkin Producer: Harry Colonby
NBC 		SUPPLIER	PRODUCERS
Diff'rent Strokes		Tandem Productions	Executive Producer: Bud Grossman Producers: Howard Leeds, Herbert Kenwith
The Facts of Life		Tandem Productions	Executive Producer: Bud Grossman Producers: Howard Leeds, Herbert Kenwith
Hello, Larry		TAT Productions	Executive Producer: George Tibbles Producer: Woody Kling
Here's Boomer		Paramount Television	Executive Producers: A.C. Lyles, Danny Wilson Producer: Fran Sears
Sanford		Tandem Productions	Executive Producer: Mart Lashman Producers: Sy Rosen, Mel Talkin, Larry Rhine
Shirley		Universal Television in association with Practor and Gamble and NBC	Producer: Jon Epstein

Bonnie Franklin, Mackenzie Phillips, Valerie Bertinelli, Pat Harrington	Sunday, 8:30	December 16, 1975	A divorced woman raises her two teenage daughters alone.
Richard Dreyfuss, Hamilton Camp, Jane Fonda, Nina Foch, John Lawlor, Jan Miner, Christopher Murney, George O'Hanlon, Jr, Jenette Samuel, Lynne Thigpen, Forrest Tucker	Wednesday, 8	February 27, 1980	
Stockard Channing, Ron Silver, Jack Samock, Max Showalter, Sydney Goldsmith	Monday, 8:30	March 24, 1980	A young, divorced woman works for a consumer advocate on a Los Angeles television station.
Jack Elam, Jeffrey Kramer, Millie Stein, Bill Erwin, Jeff Carter, Richard Stahl	Wednesday, 8:30	September, 1979	A young man inherits his great-great-grandfather's inn and his home-made monster.
Jimmy McNichol, Marc McClure, Cosie Costa, Jane Wilmore, Ruth Cox, Barbara Tarback	Tuesday, 8	September 22, 1979	Two boys enjoy the period between adolescence and adulthood, but problems often get in the way of their pursuit of fun.
Howard Hesseman, Loni Anderson, Gordon Jump, Gary Sandy, Richard Sanders, Tim Reid, Jan Smithers, Frank Bonner	Monday, 9:30 Monday, 8	September 17, 1978	A rock station tries to succeed in the ratings war.
Jim Belushi, Michael Keaton, Neil Thompson, Michael Conrad, Kate Nantall	Saturday, 8:30	September 15, 1979	Two bumbling brothers seek to climb fortune's ladder, starting as janitors in their uncle's office building.
CAST	TIME SLOT	FIRST EPISODE	SITUATION SUMMARY
Gary Coleman, Conrad Bain, Todd Bridges	Wednesday, 9	November 3, 1978	Two black boys are adopted by a wealthy white widower after their mother dies.
Charlotte Rae, John Lawlor, Lisa Whelchel, Felice Schachter, Molly Ringwald, Julie Piskanki, Kim Fields, Windy Cohn, Julie Ann Haddock	Friday, 8:30	August, 1979	Life at an exclusive girls' school, seen from the point of view of the housemother.
McLean Stevenson, Kim Richards, Krista Ericson, Joanna Gleason, George Memmoli, Meadowlark Lemon, Ruth Brown, John Fensci	Friday, 8:30 Wednesday, 9:30	January, 1979	A divorced radio talk show host raises his two teenage daughters alone.
Johnny	Friday, 8	March, 1980	A lovable, vagabond shaggy dog passes in and out of people's lives.
Redd Foxx, Marguerite Roy, Dennis Burkley	Saturday, 9	March 15, 1980	Former junkman Fred Sanford is engaged to a wealthy Beverly Hills widow.
Shirley Jones, Bret Sherry, Tracey Gold, Peter Barton	Friday, 8	September, 1979	A suddenly single mother experiences the joys and problems of moving from New York to Lake Tahoe with three free-spirited children.

THE SEASON'S SITCOMS

Situation Comedy Rankings 1979-1980 Season (September 16, 1979—April 20, 1980)

SERIES		SERIES	
	Overall Rating		Overall Rating
1 Three's Company	2	24 The Last Resort (Manday, 8:30)	62
2 M*A*S*H	4	25 Angie (Manday, 8:30)	69
3 Alice	5	26 Hella, Larry (Friday, 8:30)	69
4 Fla	7	27 The Associates (Thursday, 9:30)	71
5 The Jeffersons	8	28 The Associates (Sunday, 8:30)	74
6 One Day at a Time	10	29 The Stockard Channing Show	75
7 WKRP (Manday, 9:30)	11	30 Sanford	75
8 Goodtime Girls (Tuesday, 8:30)	12	31 Laverne and Shirley (Manday, 8)	80
9 Archie Bunker's Place	13	32 The Ropers (Saturday, 8:30)	89
10 Taxi	14	33 The Ropers (Saturday, 8)	93
11 House Calls	17	34 The Facts of Life	93
12 Happy Days	20	35 When the Whistle Blows	100
13 Angie (Tuesday, 8)	21	36 A New Kind of Family (Saturday, 8:30)	102
14 Barney Miller	23	37 One in a Million	104
15 Mark and Mindy (Sunday, 8)	25	38 Me and Maxx	107
16 Benson	25	39 Detective School	112
17 Diff'rent Strokes	28	40 Goodtime Girls (Saturday, 8:30)	119
18 Soap	28	41 The Last Resort (Wednesday, 8)	122
19 Laverne and Shirley (Tuesday, 8:30)	31	42 Struck by Lightning	124
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SELECTED SHORTS

THE FLYING KARAMAZOV

BY DENNIS O'NEIL

BROTHERS

"Who would have believed it?" the woman at the next table murmured. "Hip jugglers?"

Precisely. Unhip showmen would certainly not adopt as their motto, "Juglito ergo sum."

The Flying Karamazov Brothers juggle, therefore they are. What they are, according to the International Jugglers Association, is the second best juggling team in the world. But forget the honor and the philosophical quip, as I did when

I saw the Karamazovs recently at The Other End in Greenwich Village. The dark, cellar-like club is an unlikely setting for a juggling act. That's perfectly appropriate, because the Karamazovs are unlikely jugglers.

They do for juggling what Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce did for stand-up comedy: take a lowest-common-denominator entertainment and make it acceptable to sophisticates. Their 90-minute performance is dotted with references to literature, religion, politics and sociology, as well as a cheerful self-deprecation reminiscent of Woody Allen.

Carefully if nonchalantly, they demonstrate why tossing torches, hatchets

and sickles around is a hazardous, potentially lethal occupation, and then while they're actually doing it kid themselves for taking ridiculous risks. As in a Harold Lloyd movie, the humor emphasizes the danger and the danger adds piquancy to the humor. The danger is real, especially when they ultimately do what they have been promising—or threatening—to do: bring into the proceedings a chain saw big enough to fell a redwood. This dispels any lingering doubts about their nerve; their award-winning skill is apparent from the opening moments.

Even without the comedy, the Karamazovs would be worth watching because they are sensational jugglers. They do the standard stuff with indian clubs, balls and apples, then move onto the esoteric: live animals, champagne bottles, kitchen utensils, musical instruments and a linking ring number totally



SELECTED SHORTS

different from the dozens of routines I'd seen done with those venerable props before.

For real *oficinas* the Karamazovs offer two special interludes. The first requires a knowledge of juggling's difficulty to fully appreciate: it consists of a ten minute improvisation with all four Karamazovs flinging clubs at each other spontaneously—a juggler's equivalent of a musician's jam. No laughs and nothing particularly eye-opening, but a juggling friend assured me that we were witnessing rare dexterity. The second specialty is accessible to anyone and a lot more fun. "The Champ" offers to juggle any three things the audience gives him. If he succeeds, he is to receive a standing ovation; if he fails, he gets a pie in the face. Though not exactly unbearable, the suspense was genuine the night I saw him as he struggled with a plastic Slinky, a kite and a birthday cake. He took the pie with admirable aplomb. He doesn't always have to; a week earlier, in Chicago, he managed to successfully juggle a prophylactic, an overcoat and a bag of kitty litter.

The Karamazovs use another gimmick to build suspense throughout the evening. Periodically, they introduce a prop which they promise will be part of the climactic "terror trick." Finally, they put ten disparate objects into the air at once and finish with a sight gag that is graceful, stylish and entirely appropriate. I can't imagine a better denouement.

In fact, I can't imagine a better vaudeville, nor a more widely appealing one. No children were at the performance I attended, and that's a shame. Though they wouldn't understand the jokes about hot tub culture and minor Shakespearean characters, they'd love the slapstick and the juggling. The cliché is unavoidable: the Karamazovs have something for everyone.

These four young men are not, of course, Karamazovs, nor are they Russians or brothers. They are Californians who got together four years ago at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Their real names are Timothy Furst, Paul Magid, Howard Jay Patterson and Randy Nelson, and they project distinctive personalities without sacrificing the ensemble nature of the act. Furst is silent, a presence rather than an identity. Magid is an earnest clown. Patterson, the best juggler of the quartet, is witty, charismatic and somehow stabilizing—the perfect *older* brother. And Nelson is young, handsome, bright and friendly; he chums up to the audience continuously and enthusiastically. Nelson provides the only completely non-physical moments when, just prior to the frenetic climax, he sits on a center-stage stool and tells a quietly amusing story of lost love and a ballet class. Myron Cohen wouldn't envy the material, but Nelson delivers it pleasantly and it effectively punctuates the hustle.

Already, and perhaps inevitably, a Karamazov cult seems to be forming. Their April Fool's Day appearance at The

Other End was a pretty well-kept secret—there was virtually no advance advertising—but they packed the house with a crowd able to anticipate most of their bits. Obviously, these people had seen the Karamazovs before. I'm told they're regulars at the Goodman Studio Theater in Chicago, where they work for up to a month at a time.

Variety calls the Karamazovs "comediants of a Zen intellectual bent." True, but it doesn't say enough. What I saw on The Other End's tiny platform was sheer theater: four entertainers using everything available to them—music, conjuring, pantomime, one-liners, puns, skits and juggling—to make me feel good. ☞



Photo: Marwan Goldstein

Look Homeward,

Duck!!

BY STEVE SIMELS

The question is—What would you do if the Cosmic Axis suddenly shifted?

Granted, this isn't a problem that many of us will ever have to face. The occasional Judge Crater excepted, few among us are likely to vanish into the ether in plain view of our peers. And anyway, everyday urban life in these here United States is complicated and confusing enough as is; we have enough to worry about without eschatological dilemmas. Still, for the feisty little drake known as Howard the Duck, it's a question to be wrestled with on a 24-hour basis. So, as Karl Malden might put it—

"What would you do?"

Personally, I haven't a clue. But it is ineffectual fact that the most uniquely funny spectacle in pop culture of late has been that of a wisecracking fowl with a stoic, attempting to cope with life-as-we-know-it in a world-he-never-made.

Howard the Duck, it should be noted at this point, is the hero of a Marvel Comics magazine whose basic premise is not so far removed from a golden oldie like *Gulliver's Travels*. Howard comes from another dimension, from a parallel world where evolution has made ducks the dominant species but, in other respects, is pretty much like our own.

One day, as he was more or less minding his own business, the interdimensional whatsis hemorrhaged, and to his consternation he was dumped, rather unceremoniously, in Cleveland, Ohio (proving, probably, that some Deity somewhere had a sense of humor). For the last several years, he has been living as the ultimate outsider, his one link to sanity being the love of a well-endowed young woman named Beverly Switzler, with whom he has what my mother used to refer to euphemistically as "a thing." Needless to say, this is the first instance



of interspecies cohabitation in the graphic story medium.

But then, from the beginning, Howard was not the typical comic book character. True, there is a long and honorable tradition of "funny animal" books, the most celebrated being Carl Barks' brilliant run of *Donald Duck* and *Uncle Scrooge* for Disney (it is a recurring fantasy of Howard-fans that Mr. Barks can someday be coaxed out of retirement to illustrate an issue or two). But, traditionally, most of these strips have been worlds unto themselves, populated exclusively by animals; no humans need apply. Howard was the first animal character ever dropped into what was a mostly recognizable, real situation. The result of this and other deviations has been a comic book that makes more, and defter, satirical points about the way we "hairless apes" (as Howard calls us) run our lives than can be found in just about any other mass entertainment medium.

Like many other great fictional creations, Howard began as an afterthought, popping up in a few panels in a story in *Marathon*, Marvel's otherwise unremark-

able variation on the old E.C. Comics swamp monster routine. Reader response to the sardonic water fowl in the rumpled suit was as immediate and enthusiastic as it was unexpected, and Marvel, sensing it had a winner on its hands, tried out the character in a brief series of short, back-of-the-book featurettes. Response to these was even more positive; Howard was on his way to becoming the latest comic cult figure.

In the fall of 1975, *Howard the Duck* No. 1 made its debut at newsstands across the country. That is, if you were one of the lucky ones who found it. Fan anticipation had run so high that a few unscrupulous dealers withheld bulk quantities of the issue in order to drive up the price on the collectors market. Nonetheless, it was an immediate sales success, and the book went on for thirty issues, a healthy run for any comic.

All the issues, save the last one, were written by a Marvel staff writer named Steve Gerber, who invented the character. Gerber left amidst much bitterness and recrimination, apparently unhappy about certain editorial constraints imposed upon him, and copyright questions. The book as he wrote it was a fairly blatant exercise in self-analysis, and it is understandable that, whatever his professional and legal differences with the Marvel hierarchy, he had come to see the series as his personal property. After all, Howard had Gerber's world view, his sense of the absurd, and his taste in women. Not only that, as the readers were told in No. 19, with two exceptions,

everybody in the strip, including the villains, is Steve. Which is frankly why we pity whoever has to write the book should Steve ever depart. They're faced with two choices: either they become Gerber

SELECTED SHORTS

HOWARD, STRANGE FOWL
IN A STRANGE LAND,
PROVES THAT
THOMAS WOLFE WAS RIGHT



in order to write the mag, which is a fate almost too horrible to contemplate, or they put as much of themselves on the line as he has.

With Gerber's departure, this obviously thankless job passed to another staffer, Bill Mantlo. At the same time, Marvel, citing dealers' confusion over what kind of comic book *Howard* was, decided to switch formats, and in October

of 1979 re-launched the series as a standard size black-and-white magazine. This move also freed the series from the soft-headed censorship of the Comics Code. Mantlo immediately seized this opportunity to end the speculation about Howard and Bev's private life: the first issue of the magazine concluded with the pair in bed, obviously post-coital, and obviously satisfied.

His recent domestic bliss notwithstanding, Howard, since his arrival in our corner of the universe, has been through a series of experiences that would induce collapse in even the hardiest of souls; in fact, courtesy of Gerber, he had the first nervous breakdown in the history of comics (featuring a cameo appearance by the members of Kiss). Gerber also invented a horde of bizarre villains to plague him:

the Kidney Lady, an obnoxious crone who seemed to be on every bus Howard ever took;

Pro Rata, the Mad Financial Wizard, who lived in a tower built from used credit cards;

Dr. Bong, a bell-headed misanthrope who briefly mutated Howard into a human *schlemiel* bearing a perhaps unintentional resemblance to Son of Sam; and,

Le Beaver, a fanatical Canadian nationalist who Howard fought to the death on a tightrope over Niagara Falls.

Gerber also blasted targets like Anita Bryant ("old citrus head," was Howard's verdict), any number of ESTian self-help cults, Reverend Moon, the Psychiatric Establishment, the *Star Wars* phenomenon (a particularly wicked parody titled *May the Force Be With You*), election year politics (Howard was the 1976 candidate of the All Night Party; his slogan, "Get Down America"), and, perhaps most daringly, even the traditional crash-hit-kill conventions of the Marvel genre itself.

Gerber's Howard was a virtuoso performance, managing a rare degree of character development for the medium. It was endlessly inventive. It made you think as often as it made you laugh. As one reader observed, Howard was what the underground comics should have been, but hardly ever were.

It was also a tough act to follow. To his credit, Mantlo (who announced plaintively in the second issue "I AM NOT STEVE GERBER!!") has not gone overboard in an attempt to revamp the duck in his own image. Although he has made Howard a wee bit less choleric, he has been, if anything, fairly reverential in his handling of the various complicated sub-plots and dangling supporting characters left over from Gerber's tenure. Unsurprisingly, this has produced some reader grumbling over a lack of originality. While it is a valid complaint, it is probably unfair to judge too harshly the first few issues since the format change. Any writer coming on board a strip as complicated and sophisticated as Howard should be granted a settling-in period.

In any case, Mantlo appears to be finding his own voice. Issue three, for example, while somewhat marred by a tendency to pun for the sake of punning, was an utterly charming Christmas fable, with a *Kramer Vs. Kramer* framing story written with a great deal of sensitivity. And No. 4's *The Maltese Cockroach*, besides featuring the ultimate urban super-villain, was also a terrific deadpan send-up of Marvel's solemn and pretentious "origin" stories.

Number 6, though, should silence the fun criticism forever. It is Mantlo's first masterpiece, and in some ways the most consistently thoughtful and sharply pointed episode in the whole canon. *Duckworld* returns Howard to his home

Continued on next page

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SELECTED SHORTS

BY JOHN ROBERT TEBBEL



GONG SHOW GONG SHOW



planet, Beverly in tow, the idea being that she needs to experience what life is like for Howard as a minority of one. During his absence, however, Howard has become the godhead of an extremely lucrative new religious cult which, predictably, totally misunderstood him. The resultant social chaos caused by Howard's untimely return (not to mention the effect of a sinister plot to undrape Beverly on the *Tonight Show*) gives Manto the opportunity to take swipes at just about every aspect of American life over the last ten years. They're all skewered—every celebrity, politician, huckster, and wacko. Religion, government, show-biz—nothing escapes. And, of course, Howard finds out that you really can't go home again.

There are, of course, people who still think that none of this has any place in a comic book. They may, in fact, be right, and Gerber was probably thinking of them when he first concocted his *Duck For All Seasons*. Even now, there are staffers over at Marvel secretly rubbing their hands over the delicious, er, subversiveness of the whole business. After all, kids are gonna read this stuff, and the prospect of a generation raised on a diet of Howard's corrosively sane cynicism is nothing less than mind boggling.

In any event, Howard himself couldn't care less. He's got his own problems, see. The Cosmic Axis has shifted again, and he and the hairless ape he loves have landed in a swamp located God-only-knows-where. Will the duck and his paramour make it back to Cleveland without getting his cigar wet? Will Howard escape similar messiah-treatment back in Ohio? Will we ever find out exactly how he and Bev do "it"? Only time and Bill Manto know for sure, and Manto does his talking only through Howard. Available, as they say, on better newsstands everywhere. Act now. ☛

Holy Mother of Ted Smith, what is that? That sweet-looking old lady screeching away at that defenseless song. Or that fugitive from the repo auction grinning and sweating his way through jokes Moses composed to help pass the time in the wilderness. A nightmare? The depths of black humor?

No, just *The Gong Show*, the bastard child of *Major Bowes Amateur Hour* and an audition for hell.

The idea of a new talent showcase has intrigued showmen from caves to cable. Usually, a small amount of respect for the performer inhibits the audience's displeasure with the unpolished "acts" on the program, along the lines of "He's gotta lotta guts" or "Let's hear it for him one time."

The inevitable but usually rare disaster of an act so bad it was painful to watch, brought forth the worthy hook. Major Bowes's gong was a hook you could hear on the radio, a genteel model, better suited to announcing the dinner hour than tolling the twilight of the too naive. In Ted Mack's TV version the gong was put away and the acts sanitized for your protection.

The gong Chuck Barris reincarnated was a four-foot floor model in the J. Arthur Rank style. Three celebrity judges were supplied with great, padded strikers to sound the momentous, low gong, which set-off a litany of loser-buzzers, Harpo-hanks and a final, humiliating, Bronx

fanfare from the band. Overnight success has its appeal, but instant failure—there's a market that hasn't been touched, and the supply is so dependable.

Barris saw the fearful, hesitant heart of the amateur night and made it the star. It was the *Gong Show*, not some namby pamby amateur hour. No losers, no failures, no gongs—no show. Talent takes a holiday.

One of Barris's secrets was a preliminary audition which eliminated only the slick and professional. Any street singer or rampus room joker or bull-goose-loony exhibitionist could parade the *Gong Show* stage for a minimum of 45 delicious seconds. The great Gong demands human sacrifice, and the volunteers are lined up around the block.

Even before *The Gong Show*, Chuck Barris had always depended on amateurs' earnest desire to please—like any good gameshow producer. The confidences broken on *The Newlywed Game*, and *The Dating Game's* parody of sexual attraction were mere warm-ups to the main event.



For anyone even slightly involved in show business, *The Gong Show* laughs were real and chillingly close to home. For example, the woman (one of hundreds) who thinks she can sing. Not only

SELECTED SHORTS

GONG SHOW

that, she thinks she's good, terrific. Next stop: Vegas. If intentions were contracts she'd beat Johnny all hollow. But from this side of the stage it's a horror: clownish make-up, wallpaper-print house-dress, baggy stockings, off key all the way. But *she* thinks she's doing it right. Our laughs cover up the embarrassed realization that she's pouring out exactly what showbiz means to her. She's the individual in the screaming crowd, the lowest common denominator of the Nielsen share. Exalted and pathetic at the same



time, she brings us a moment of enlightenment usually available only in a monastery.

A lot easier to take, and laugh at, were the good humored crazies with novelty acts that beggar the term: college kids with no pride and a six pack of Rapid Shave; two nymphets who tantalized phallic lollipops until a panelist hit the gong in a fit of propriety.

Surrounded by programs which sold hyperactivity as spontaneity, *The Gong Show* was disturbingly, hilariously real. The show broke the daytime programming formula where sex and cold cash are the unnamable gods of the soups and games. The Gong's juice is the pure desperate craving for attention, the spotlight, the roar of the crowd. As Barris

GONG SHOW

often joked as he comforted a righteously jeered and gonged performer. "They were shouting 'Bravo! Bravo!'" He wasn't telling them what they wanted to hear, he was telling them what they actually *did* hear.

Barris's embarrassed affection for anyone who would perform anything for a crowd of strangers made his clumsy caricature of a smooth MC one of the most endearing debuts in television. While his name and his show became sure-fire punchline fodder, his consistent vulnerability and genuine alarm at any performer's even momentary discomfort or embarrassment made him the darling of the audience.

Without effort, Barris's unstudied, klutzy honesty grew into one of the closest rapports even enjoyed by a performer and audience. His nervous hand-clapping was aped by the audience until it seemed as if a gospel preacher had whipped his congregation into a holy rolling frenzy only to hand them over to this clown and his circus.

The actually *good* acts, and they were many and various, were only mild diversions, fillers. The gonged were the true and only stars.



If you only knew *The Gong Show* from the evening version, you might wonder what this fuss is all about. The once-a-week version became a "best-of" selection of agreeable, high-scoring acts with a few lonely losers suddenly trapped in some kind of variety show. There was none of the blood-lust anticipation which charged the daytime shows. "How bad will the next one be?" "What unimaginable travesty is about to unfold?"

No, the evening *Gong Show* was too close to prime time. There were few of the inspired ringers the producers threw in to show off their acutely heightened sense of the absurd. Inbetween the real people were the Unknown Comic (the pick of the litter); the shuffling stagehand—"Gene, Gene, the dancing machine;" Scarlett and Rhett—two guys in GWTW drag who start-off by not giving a damn and proceed to get very few lines past the censor; the confused dispenser of addled thoughts-for-the-day, "the Father." These were Barris's Men-on-the-Street, the stuff of high pressure, one-take, television comedy. It couldn't last.

Recently, the maverick independent producers have been evicted from their front-row seats in hog heaven. The "prime time access" half-hour is no longer a mix of five different shows but the same show five-times-a-week. And the majority of stations seem to be picking the same few blockbuster shows. The herd passes by the Barris oddities, which are difficult to produce at high frequency and do not fit into the stream-lined profile broadcasters are adopting to fend off the challenge of cable and home video. Flash—TV plays it safe.



Missed Cues

by Leonard Maltin

THE SENATOR WAS INDISCREET

reporter who spars with him by taking aim at his client in print. Arleen Whelan is the femme fatale from the enemy camp who charms Ashton's diary out from under his nose, and Hans Couried plays a hotel room-service waiter who spouts Communistic ideas. There's a brief, unbilled cameo by Gene Fowler, Sr., and for the film's punchline, a surprise appearance as Mrs. Ashton by—well, that would give away the surprise, wouldn't it?

Johnson did the final draft of MacArthur's screenplay, and Kaufman went to work with his cast, concentrating all his energies on the content of the film and none on its physical creation. "He sat with his back to the actors (during filming) and listened to what they said," Fowler, Jr. later reported. "He didn't give a damn where the camera was."

Assessing the job of film director, Kaufman remarked, "The only problem is staying awake."

When the film was completed, everyone involved was pleased with the finished product, though quite unprepared for its reception.

Variety wrote, "With Hollywood and Congress a bad parody these days one might wonder if Universal is indiscreet about releasing *The Senator Was Indiscreet*. But tain't so, McGee. This is such a broadly humorous lampoon of politico goings-on that it would be foolhardy for the most thin-skinned of our lawmakers

George S. Kaufman's achievements as playwright, director, and wit are legendary, but only once during his long career was he persuaded to direct a film. His friend, screenwriter-producer Nunnally Johnson, offered him an amusing script by their friend Charles MacArthur, co-author of *The Front Page*, along with the promise that all technical aspects of filmmaking would be handled by film editor Gene Fowler, Jr., the son of another good friend, the same-named Sr. of literary fame.

The film, made in 1947, was *The Senator Was Indiscreet*, and while not the masterpiece one might hope for, it is still original and funny, its political barbs still timely and potent. It's well worth seeing the next time it turns up on your local television late-show, or at your neighborhood revival theater.

The story concerns Senator Melvin Ashton, a windy, white-haired boob who decides to run for President, to the amazement and consternation of his party, his enemies, and even his harried

staff. A complete nincompoop, whose major campaign promise is to send every man, woman and child to Harvard, the senator has one unexpected ace in the hole: During his tenure in Washington he has kept a diary of every crooked, shady deal his colleagues have perpetrated. This becomes his ticket to power, but also his potential undoing when the hot book is stolen by his opponent's girlfriend.

"The senator," wrote Kaufman's biographer Howard Teichmann, "was Kaufman's kind of character—the humbler, the innocent, the inoffensive fellow." The role, originally intended for Fredric March, is played to perfection by William Powell (who endeared himself to audiences that same year in *Life With Father*). Powell's senator has a logic all his own, and a stern-faced guilelessness that makes the revelation of his diary-keeping all the more surprising.

In addition to Powell, the film "introduces" Peter Lind Hayes, (who'd actually been in films before) as the senator's resourceful press agent, and features Ella Raines as Hayes's girlfriend, a bright



STANDING UP

Continued from page 9

and his buddies had a different attitude. Closer to the ideal of the Lenny Bruce type talker who could change the world through the sheer force of his comic savagery. The Bluestone wavers were torn between their longing for success and the notion of the stand-up as an existential hero. It was as if these comics couldn't decide between throwing the discus with Kristy McNichol on the *Challenge of the Network Stars* (and taking it seriously) and venting to go to jail for something they said. This confusion led to serious disappointment in what has become an increasingly narrow stream of American comedy.

Senter didn't seem to have this problem. He knows the idea of the "hip comic" died long ago. He wouldn't even try to fill the slot. How can you be hip? There are no more big rooms to play where you can get down and be different, no more Nat Hentoff-Ralph Gleason beatniks to extol you as the second coming. The only place a comic reaches people these days is on the tube and you can't be hip on the tube.

Senter realizes this. His attitude spoke of a man who'd examined his soul and realized he was a prisoner of his imagination, a comic imagination that happens to be outside the current constricted flow of things. Like Bluestone, Senter figures he's just too weird. And he accepts it. It quite likely will doom him to a stand-up career of Improv cheeseburgers, but what can you do? The situation reminded me of something Samuel Fuller, the infamous filmmaker who directed several, way-off-beat movies in the 50s and early 60s, once said. Fuller hadn't made a film in America for a dozen years, not for lack of trying. "I keep trying to sell out," Fuller exclaimed, "it's just that I can't. It is easier for me to be what they call crazy. I just can't have a love scene unless it's seen through the cross-hairs of a sniper's rifle." Fuller went on to say it was completely in self-defense that he adopted this position. "Otherwise," he said, "they chew you up and you don't know what direction you're going. This way at least I know I'm standing still."

This type mindset recalled a ghostly conversation I once had with Freddie Prinze. Freddie, of course, was the real star of that first 70s wave of Improv comics. No one ever made the joint jump like Freddie. If a Sandi's agent ever came into the Improv to escape the rain, Freddie Prinze would be the one he would have discovered. Besides all the star-quality

(many still insist Freddie had the cutest butt, male or female, ever on TV), Freddie was funny. His roach and ethnic parodies were among the first of the slew and they were tops. He was tough, too. Once he said, "Hey, man, I don't dig drugs because I don't want to come home and my baby brother try to sell me a rattie." Coming from 157th Street, it sounded true.

Sometime in the summer of '74, before the Chico series hit air, I did a piece about Freddie for *New York* magazine. He liked the story and occasionally we'd pass the time of night. Two years later *New York* sent me to LA to do a story about Richard Pryor. I was sitting at the Comedy Store digging Pryor, who, although already in decline, was still quite hot. Freddie came in. People cheered and laid on the glad hand. He stood up. It was the first time I'd seen Freddie's number since he'd made the move to LA. He blew. It was all the same jokes he used two years before. He hadn't added one line. Apparently he hadn't written one. Or even bought one. His delivery, once full of arm-swinging fire, was listless. When he did the rattie line it came out sounding like one of those horrible Sammy Davis moments of Hollywood seriousness.

Later that night Freddie and I went for a two-wheel 'round the hairpins ride in his mint blue Corvette. As we smoked the Hills, Freddie talked about how embarrassed the show made him even though he was warmly received by kneejerk "fans." "They'll clap for anything," he said solemnly. "Pryor doesn't need that. Wow, if I could get together five minutes like his shit, I'd come. But it's not there. It's like I lost it somewhere. After I got in that show, it drained me out, took me like a blood-sucker. You remember, I used to funny . . . yeah, I used to be a contender . . . I really wanted to be Lenny Bruce. Right. How can you be Lenny Bruce when they've got you being Chico? Pryor gets over because he's got black people to buy his records and he don't give a fuck. I can't do that. Just can't. It's like they robbed my brain and stuck something else in there instead. I'm not funny anymore."

He sounded beaten, an old man at 20. He could have bought it right then, he was down enough. Of course, Freddie's dissatisfaction with his comedy was hardly mentioned as a possible cause in the endless reams of "too much, too soon" copy that accompanied his death. The bio writers and media men probably decided the concept was too hip for the audience to relate to.

to think the shoe fits. Actually, this is tiptop entertainment of a type the audiences haven't had in a long time—and could stand. It will do good to smash business."

Variety underestimated the reactionary fervor of the time, however. The House Un-American Activities Committee was already in business, their sensibilities easily jarred. Senator Joseph McCarthy, at the outset of his witch-hunt, labeled the film "un-American" and "traitorous." Johnson's daughter Nora reports in her book *Flashback* that Clare Boothe Luce stood up in the middle of a private Hollywood screening and said, "Don't tell me an American made this picture." Her anger was strong enough to cause her husband's *Life* magazine to print a retraction of its favorable three-page spread on the film.

The Iowa and Nebraska theater owners' associations boycotted the film, calling it "a reflection on the integrity of every duly elected representative of the American people," which could be used "as vicious propaganda by subversive elements." The Motion Picture Association of America, which had previously approved the script, decided that the film was too volatile to be shown overseas and banned any foreign release.

The serious opposition which met this broad lampoon plainly underscores the era's extremism. Ultimately, Hollywood blacklisted Kaufman for his participation in the film.

For Kaufman, who had once offered the theatrical definition, "Satire is what closes on Saturday night," movie satire was what ended his all-too-brief screen directing career. It was the movies' loss.

To rent *The Senator Was Indiscreet* in 16mm, contact: Budget Films, 4590 Santa Monica Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90029; Ivy Films, 165 West 46th St., New York, NY 10036



FAST TAKES

Jim Backus

BY LEONARD MALTIN

Best known as a comic actor, and as the voice of Mr. Magoo, the talents—and credentials—of Jim Backus extend far beyond that limited range.

He studied at the prestigious American Academy of Dramatic Arts, and has given notable non-comic performances over the years, most memorably as James Dean's father in *Rebel Without a Cause*. He also won fame in the sympathetic role of Joan Davis' beleaguered husband in the classic 50s sitcom *I Married Joan*.

But type-casting is a way of life in Hollywood, and Backus has spent most of his career playing comedy blowhards. It's not hard to see why; he's incomparably good in such roles.

This stereotype emerged in the 1940s, when the young actor made his mark in radio. Several years ago I discussed 40s radio with him while gathering

oral histories for *The American Academy of Humor*.

Jim Backus talking:

I really stumbled into comedy, because I was, and hope I still am, an actor, not really a comedian. But in the days of radio there was something known as an "AFRA double," which meant you did more than one voice, and this was what they were always looking for. Because of my deep, resonant voice, this is what I fit into.

Then I got into the character of Hubert Updike, who just appeared on one episode [of *The Alan Young Show*] and wasn't really planned at all. I bussed the voice on a kind of advertising agency guy in New York, because in those days that was how they really talked. Hubert was larger than life, he couldn't have

been done as a TV character . . . just as Jack Benny was never as good on TV as he'd been on radio, because you could use your mind to create things in your head. You could picture his vault, which was much funnier than actually seeing it on TV. For instance, one joke we had with Hubert had him driving along with his girlfriend, alongside a train, and the car goes across the railroad tracks. Hubert's girlfriend tells him to stop, and he pays no attention to her. Then you

hear the train screech to a halt, and she says, "Hubert, sometimes you act as if you owned the railroad!" and he'd say something like, "Care to see my receipt?"

Then there were the Cadillac jokes, millions of them. I had to shoot my Cadillac, I found out it spent a night in the garage with a Ford . . . I had to sell my Cadillac, the ashtrays were full . . . I had to sell my Cadillac, the tires were dirty . . . or, it's pointing the wrong way. And I had writers like Abe Burrows and Nat Hiken doing these jokes sometimes. But Hubert was only good for six or seven lines, that was all. There was nothing more to him: he was the richest man in the world. They came to me and wanted to do a half-hour show and I said, no, it wouldn't work. But years later when they did *Gilligan's Island* they remembered Hubert, changed his name to Thurston Howell III and I had four good years with it.

But being versatile wasn't always well regarded. I remember Ed Wynn saying to me, "The trouble with guys like you is that you'll never be stars. Look at me, I don't try to prove how many different things I can do; the audience doesn't want it." I remember when I got the Magoo part he said "Stick with it." Look, Frank Morgan made a career out of playing a slightly muddled guy, and soon they were calling them "Frank Morgan parts."

The definitive radio comedian was Jack Benny, and he was very generous with laughs. He surrounded himself with funny people. Fred Allen, too, would let others get the laughs. Portland would be talking and he'd say, "You mean—" and she'd do the punchline. Or he'd say, "They were that cold, eh, Titus?"

Fred Allen was a naturally funny
Continued on page 62

ACCESS TO LAUGHS

B ooks

BOBBS-MERRILL
M*A*S*H By David Reiss

JOVE BOOKS
The Blues Brothers
Cherch and Chong's Next Movie

THE LARKSDALE PRESS
How to Write Dumb Poems by Gus Kilbaur
The Cat Testrophy by Al Kaeppl

RICHARD MAREK PUBLISHERS
The Great Sit-Com Book by Rick Mitz

WILLIAM MORROW
Aerphobies by Don Lessen
The Glass Bed by Norman Panama and Albert Lewin

PELICAN PUBLISHING COMPANY
Best Editorial Cartoons of the Year: 1980
edited by Charles Brooks

RUNNING PRESS
The Saturday Night Live Coloring Book

STARLOG PRESS
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M ovies

AVCO EMBASSY
Hog Wild—Michael Biehn, Patti D'Arbanville

COLUMBIA PICTURES
Wholly Moses—Dudley Moore, Laraine Newman, James Coco,
Richard Pryce, Paul Sand

Used Cars—Jack Ward, Curt Russell
Continued on next page





ACCESS TO LAUGHS



PARAMOUNT

Airplane—Robert Hayes, Julie Hagerty

TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX

Oh, Heavenly Dog—Chevy Chase, Benji

Middle-Age Crazy—Ann-Margaret

UNITED ARTISTS

Roadie—Meat Loaf, Art Carney, Kiki Hunter, Roy Orbison,

Alice Cooper, Blondie

Caveman—Ringo Starr, Barbara Bach

Those Lips, Those Eyes—Frank Langella

UNIVERSAL

The Blues Brothers—John Belushi, Dan Aykroyd,
Carrie Fisher, James Brown, Cab Calloway, Aretha Franklin

Cheech & Chong's Next Movie—

Richard "Cheech" Marin, Tommy Chong

Smokey and the Bandit II—Burt Reynolds, Sally Field

In God We Trust—Marty Feldman, Louise Lasser

WARNER BROTHERS

Bronco Billy—Clint Eastwood, Sondra Locke

Up the Academy—Ron Lieberman

Caddyshack—Chevy Chase, Bill Murray, Ted Knight,

Rodney Dangerfield, Sarah Halcomb

Fu Manchu—Peter Sellers

Divine Madness—Bette Midler

WALT DISNEY

Herbie Goes Bananas—Charles Martin Smith, John Vernon,

Cloris Leachman, Harvey Korman

Mary Poppins—Julie Andrews, Dick Van Dyke, Glynis Johns

C
lubs



CHICAGO

Chicago Comedy Showcase—1101 W. Diversey Parkway.

312-348-1101

The Comedy Cottage—6350 N. River Road, Rosemont.

312-696-8077

Comedy Womb—3903 Joliet, Lyons. 312-442-5735

Kobart's Comedy Kove—3136 N. Narragansett. 312-622-6676.

Zanies—1548 N. Wells. 312-337-4027

DALLAS

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Random Scam. 2109 Commerce Street. 214-742-3577



ACCESS TO LAUGHS

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The Comedy Corner—4700 E. Pacific Coast Highway,
Long Beach. 213-433-5721

Comedy and Magic Club—1018 Hermosa Avenue,
Hermosa Beach. 213-372-1193

Comedy Store—8433 Sunset Blvd., Hollywood. 213-656-6225

Comedy Store West—1621 Westwood Blvd. 213-477-4751

The Encino Laff Stop—17255 Ventura Blvd., Encino.
213-784-5543 and 213-858-1629

The Improvisation—8162 Melrose Avenue,
West Hollywood. 213-651-2583

John's Place—4360 Melrose Avenue, Hollywood.
213-662-2865 and 213-661-6462

The Laff Stop—2122 S.E. Bristol Street, Santa Ana. 714-751-7867

The Laff Stop at Griswold's Boiler Room—415 W. Foothill Blvd.,
Claremont. 714-621-6806

The Malibu Improv—Holiday House Restaurant,
27400 Pacific Coast Highway. 213-457-3641

The New Lee House—24 N. Mentor Avenue, Pasadena.
213-449-4053

Off the Wall—1204 N. Fairfax Avenue,
West Hollywood. 213-655-0226

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Catch a Rising Star—1487 First Avenue. 212-794-1906

Comic Strip—1568 Second Avenue. 212-661-9386

Dangerfield's—1118 First Avenue. 212-593-1650

Good Times—449 Third Avenue. 212-686-4250

Improvisation—358 West 44th Street. 212-765-8268

Manhattan Punchline—260 West 41st St.

212-921-8288 Fridays & Saturdays

Monkey Bar—60 East 54th Street. 212-753-1066

Mostly Magic—55 Carmine Street. 212-924-1472

Pips—2005 Emmons Avenue, Brooklyn. 212-646-9433

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Broadway Theater

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Royale Theater, 45th Street West of Broadway. 212-245-5760

Annie—Alvin Theater, 250 West 52nd Street. 212-757-8646

Barnum—St. James Theater, 44th Street West of Broadway.
212-398-0280

Denthrap—Music Box Theater, 239 West 45th Street.
212-246-4636

Continued on next page



ACCESS TO LAUGHS



Fearless Frank—Princess Theater, 48th Street between Broadway and 7th Avenue. 212-586-3903

Gemini—Little Theater, 240 West 44th Street.
212-221-6425

I Ought to Be in Pictures—Eugene O'Neill Theater,
230 West 49th Street. 212-246-0220

Morning's at Seven—Lyceum Theater, 149 West 45th Street.
212-582-3897

Oh! Calcutta!—Edison Theater, 240 West 47th Street.
212-757-7164

Romantic Comedy—Barrymore Theater, 243 West 47th Street.
212-246-0390

Sugar Babies—Mark Hellinger Theater,
237 West 51st Street. 212-757-7064

Talley's Folly—Brooks Atkinson Theater,
256 West 47th Street. 212-245-3430

The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas

46th Street Theater, 226 West 46th Street. 212-246-0246

The Man Who Came To Dinner—Circle in the Square,
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They're Playing Our Song—Imperial Theater,
249 West 43rd Street. 212-265-4311

Off-Broadway

A Couple White Chicks Sitting Around Talking

Astor Place Theater, 434 Lafayette Street. 212-254-4370

Chase a Rainbow—Theatre Four, 424 West 55th Street

Fortune—Actus Playhouse, Sheridan Square. 212-691-6226

Gertrude Stein Gertrude Stein Gertrude Stein

Provincetown Playhouse; 133 MacDougal Street. 212-777-2571

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Scrambled Feet—Village Gate

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212-982-9292

Table Settings—Chelsea Theater Center,

407 West 43rd Street. 212-541-8394

The Incomparable Max—Manhattan Punch Line

260 West 41st Street. 212-921-8288

Vanities—Chelsea Theater Center,

407 West 43rd Street. 212-541-8394

Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?—Manhattan Punch Line,

260 West 41st Street. 212-921-8288



Bill Cosby talks to Jim Lund: Red Cross lifesaving hero.

Cosby:

"Must've been fate that brought you to that motel 1,000 miles from home, Jim."

Lund:

"Good thing I walked out by the pool when I did, Bill – that boy would be a drowning statistic."

Nobody else knew what to do...

a man was shaking the kid by his heels!

All I could think was *get air in those lungs*. I laid him down

and tilted his head back to open



the airway so I could breathe some life into him.

The mouth-to-mouth was – everything was automatic. My Red Cross training came back clear as a bell that day – 25 years after I took that course."

Cosby:

"And the boy – O.K.?"

Lund:

"First time I ever got pleasure seeing a little boy cry. His father cried, too."

Cosby:

"Bet he was grateful."

Lund:

"Yes, that boy's father was

grateful. So was I. Grateful for Red Cross."



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Red Cross**

man. I was very young when I worked with him. He was a very generous man; he would walk around New York with a pocketful of five-dollar bills, just to have them ready when guys would walk up to him, old vaudevillians or whoever, and he'd always be ready. In fact, if they didn't show up he'd get worried about them.

He was terribly kind, and forgiving. I was just a punk kid starting out; I didn't know anything, and if I blew a line or muffed a joke, even on the air in front of twenty-five-million people, he wouldn't do anything about it or turn on me. In fact, he made the most of it.

At one time I was doing five daytime serials at one time, and running around, but even that wasn't so hard, because it was radio. We weren't seen, but we worked in front of an audience, and whenever an audience responds to what you're doing, whether you make them laugh or make them cry, it's a great satisfaction. It was exhilarating, and it was so easy it seemed like a license to steal money, working in radio.

YOU ASKED FOR IT

Continued from page 11

Bud: You know his name as well as I do.
Lou: Look, look, look you got a pitcher on the team?
Bud: Sure.
Lou: The pitcher's name?
Bud: Tomorrow.
Lou: You don't wanna tell me today?



Bud: I'm telling you today.
Lou: Then go ahead.
Bud: Tomorrow.
Lou: What time?
Bud: What time what?
Lou: What time tomorrow you going to tell me who's pitching.
Bud: Now listen, Who is not pitching. Who—
Lou: I'll break your arm you say "Who's on first." I want to know what's the pitcher's name.
Bud: What's on second.
Lou: I don't know.
Both: Third base!
Lou: You got a catcher?
Bud: Certainly.
Lou: The catcher's name?
Bud: Today.
Lou: Today. And tomorrow's pitching?
Bud: Now you've got it.
Lou: All we got is a couple of days of the week. You know, I'm a catcher, too.

Bud: So they tell me.
Lou: I get behind the plate, do some fancy catching, tomorrow's pitching on my team and the heavy hitter gets up.
Bud: Yes.
Lou: Now, the heavy hitter bunts the ball. When he bunts the ball, me being a good catcher, I'm going to throw the guy out at first base, so I pick up the ball and throw it to who?
Bud: Now, that's the first thing you've said right.
Lou: I don't even know what I'm talking about!
Bud: That's all you have to do.
Lou: Is to throw the ball to first base?
Bud: Yes.
Lou: Now, who's got it?

Bud: Naturally.
Lou: Look, if I throw the ball to first base, somebody's got to get it. Now, who has it?
Bud: Naturally.
Lou: Who?
Bud: Naturally.
Lou: Naturally?
Bud: Naturally.
Lou: So, I pick up the ball and I throw it to Naturally?
Bud: No, you don't. You throw the ball to Who!
Lou: Naturally.
Bud: That's different.
Lou: That's what I say.
Bud: You're not saying it—
Lou: I throw the ball to Naturally?
Bud: You throw it to Who.
Lou: Naturally.
Bud: That's it.
Lou: That's what I said.
Bud: Listen, you ask me.
Lou: I throw the ball to who?
Bud: Naturally.
Lou: Now you ask me.
Bud: You throw the ball to Who.
Lou: Naturally.
Bud: That's it.
Lou: Same as you!
Bud: Don't change them around.
Lou: Same as you!
Bud: Okay, now get it over with.



Lou: I throw the ball to who. Whoever it is drops the ball and the guy runs to second.
Bud: Yes.
Lou: Who picks up the ball and throws it to what. What throws it to I don't know. I don't know throws it back to tomorrow. Triple play.
Bud: Yes.
Lou: Another guy gets up and hits a long fly to because. Why? I don't know. He's on third and I don't give a darn.
Bud: —eh, what?
Lou: I said, "I don't give a darn."
Bud: Oh, that's our shortstop.
Lou: Ayeiii!

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